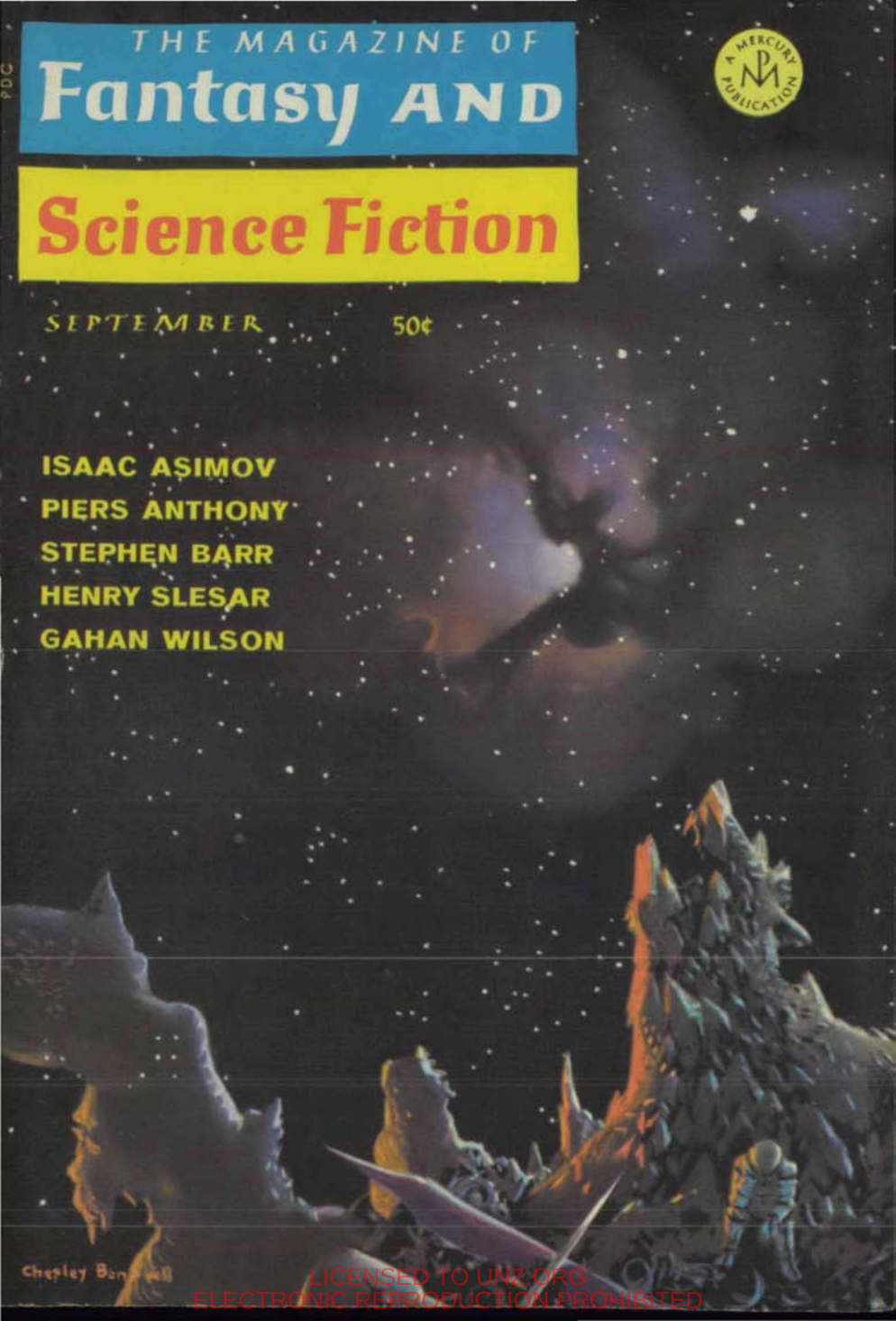

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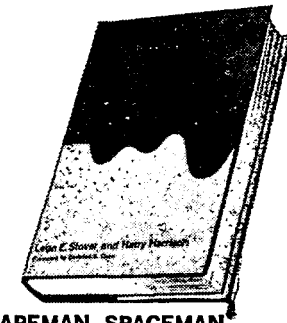

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Ed Jesby's first story for F&SF (SEA WRACK, May 1964) was a memorable and strange tale that was especially notable for its "air of essential alienness." His latest story is good in an entirely different way. Its background is contemporary; its situation and characters (racing, bookies, gangsters) are mostly familiar, with one seven-foot exception. The exception, of course, is an ogre. Mr. Jesby's ogre is an entirely different ogre, and his adjustment to our real world seems as logical as it is entertaining.

OGRE!

by Ed Jesby

THE OGRE WAS ASLEEP. HE HAD never been able to be moderate, and he had been asleep for a long time. He was covered with earth and the mulch of decayed leaves and wood, and low bushes and grass grew on him. Near the green covered sprawl of his left arm there was a mound smaller than his covering, which supported a sparse growth of moss, and a single mushroom with a red-tinged and fluted umbrella under its cap. The birds were very loud in the forest on this spring morning, but this was the first spring in which the sounds reached the ogre. He stirred and the ground cracked around his head and the chirping, twittering clamor reached his ears with a stronger persuasion, and so he sat up. Tearing through the earth, his head uprooted a bush, and he came erect with the bush riding on the top of his head like a plume. He opened his nostrils and eyes and brushed the small annoyance off.

He yawned hugely, his jaw cracked, and his left arm drew back leaving a mole run widely spread along the ground. He grinned—and remembered and ripped his arm free of the earth. Carefully picking at the tendrils and unwinding the heavier roots from his arm, he flexed the muscles; and pleased by the result, he plunged his cupped fingers into the earth near the smaller mound. Working his thumb until he had a secure grip, he pulled the corselet from the mound. He held it up to the light and saw that the proximity to his body and its preservative oils had kept it remarkably well.

He nodded his head sadly and got to his feet, and as he gently

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freed himself from the roots and plants, he shook the armor and listened to the rattle. Turning it open side down, he let the ribs and separated vertebrae fall out, and shook his head. That was the way knights were, always looking for trouble when all an ogre wanted was to be left alone.

He wondered how long he had been asleep. The trees were much taller than he remembered them, but that was no sign. Some of them did not even look like the trees he had lain down with. The clearing was much smaller too, and the sky was not as blue as he remembered it, but he shrugged his thoughts away. He had always awakened after a long sleep with a touch of melancholy.

This sleeping was really too much, but that was the trouble with being an ogre, he thought, and reached behind his back to scratch the crown of his head with the horny callus on the heel of his hand. The second joint in his elbow cracked with disuse, and he willed the pain away. There was an advantage in having a set of eyes that could see as well at night as in the day, but coupled with a metabolism that was as efficient as the solar reaction, it often made one forget to sleep.

He judged he had caught up on his rest, and went into a leaping dance that shook the ground and startled the birds into abandoning their eggs. When he was well loosened, he started for a small pool he remembered. Walking through the woods made him certain that he had overslept. The ground was strewn with small brightly painted cylinders that were in various stages of corrosion, and they popped and crumpled under his unheeding feet.

He found the pool easily, but the bottom was covered with a black sludge, and he satisfied himself with looking at his image.

He was as he remembered himself. The same wide jaw that made his head look as if it were broader than it was high, and the same crop of spiky hair radiating from his head in a circular fan. He showed himself his teeth and saw that the one in the second row he had lost in the fight with the last of the tall meat-eating lizards had finished growing back in while he slept. The trees above him shifted, and a bright ray of sunlight struck his eyes, and the slitted pupils closed to a hair-thin line.

He giggled a bass titter that was more of a reflex than a sound of amusement, and opened his ears fully. He had not yet tried his voice. "Yclept Knut," he said, and reassured by the sound of his name continued, "Jeg ha souvre fra lange," and was pleased by the full burgeon tones, and the strength of his old language. He looked down. The kilt he had made from the skin of the great bear he had killed while moving north to avoid hav-

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ing to kill the knight was falling apart.

The world was still dull, hidden behind the long sleep, but he heard the wind on the ice of the northern plains, and for a moment he saw the knight on his shaggy horse slogging along his backtrail in the frozen hummocky landscape . . . Though there were still traces of snow in the deeper shadows and the air was still chilly, he was not in the north, and he dug his fingers in his ears to clear them. Since he always slept on his left side to hear away from the ground, his right ear took longer than the left. It was full of rootballs, and at the bottom it held a tiny dry flower that caught under his fingernail. Holding his finger in front of his nose, he studied the elfin petals and the tiny corolla before he twitched his ears forward. Rotating his head on the short column of his neck, he stopped when his ears were at right angles to the source of the sound. He did not like it. From left to right, again and again, there rose a hissing, hurrying drone.

"Fra Satans," he said, and decided to reverse his path. He turned and found that the sound also came from this new direction. It was the same; it had the same quality of hurrying repetition, but the frequency was smaller he decided, and he walked onward toward the lesser of the evils.

Knut emerged from the wooded center strip that separated the parallel four lane highways of the turnpike, and stood in the rough before the barbered grass that led down to the pavement. His appearance caused no sudden consternation. None of the speeding cars slowed. Knut was a short ogre. He was not much over seven feet tall, and he had the physique of an exceptionally short legged mesomorph. The people who drove the cars had never stood still between the borders of trees and never walked on the grass. The perspectives of ignorance and a human weakness for categories told the drivers that the figure against the background of green was a stocky man in shorts.

Knut watched for a long time. He had not remembered roads that ripped through the land with such insensitive precision, and he did not recall that the wheel was in such general use when he had gone to sleep. He had no way of knowing it, but the traffic in back of him was the last of the morning rush to the city, and the roadway he observed carried the few cars of the people who commuted from the city to the suburbs.

It was not long before the traffic died away to an occasional car, and Knut sat down to plan in the relative quiet. He was very sensitive: his ears had enormous range; his eyes could gather and amplify the smallest bit of light, and his nostrils sucked minute knowledge

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of all smells from the volume of air his lungs required. This was a bad world for him. Shiny, wheeled beetles reflected glittering lights in patterns that forced his eyes to constantly compensate; the air, and even the earth, groaned with deep manic percussions; and the world stank with vapors more noxious than the rots of the great lizards' swamps. He shivered. He could force himself to sleep again, and awaken and see if he had found a better time.

There had been no cars for a comparatively long time, and the world was almost pleasant except for its smell, and Knut relaxed and called a nearby blue jay to him. He whistled a combination of deep and high notes between his lips and upper back teeth that the bird seemed to understand.

The jay perched on the last finger of his turned hand, preened its blue feathers and began to mock him. The deep-voiced rumble of his giggle did not disturb the bird, and it boldly leaped to the jutting tip of Knut's nose. Crossing his eyes without inconvenience, he focused on the shiny beads on the bird's head and drank its emotions. It seemed to remember him, and he felt less of a stranger.

They amused each other with their joy, but it was tiring for the bird, and it tucked its head underneath a wing and slept. Knut sat immobile as a rock with his shock of hair jutting above the undergrowth like a black extension of the bushes.

One of the vehicles that so annoyed him howled its soprano way down the road, and he did his best to ignore it until its left front tire blew.

The explosion jerked the bird out of its sleep, and it leapt into the air in a flurried aura of wings and fear. Knut came to his feet in a single motion, rising from his flat-heeled squat in a blur too fast for anything but missile radar to follow.

"Holt Keft," he bellowed, and in one of his rare rages started forward to destroy the disturber of his peace.

The blown tire spun the black Buick in circles, and it careened up onto the grass, seemed to pause, and then lazily turned onto its side. Knut rushed forward, keeping his hops low and swinging in a gigantic burlesque of a walkathon gait, and was upon the car before it had settled. He wanted to bring the sides of his hands down on the car in the ax-like blows that had killed the tyrannosaur rex, but there was a man inside. He plucked the front right door off the sedan and pulled the man out to safety. The man stared up at him and whipped a hand inside his coat. He came up with the gun more quickly than he had thought himself capable, but Knut's ogre reflexes had taken it away from him before his trigger

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finger had been tight enough to be wrenched by its removal.

"Lemme alone," the man screamed the words, and after a moment Knut released him, and the man started to run. Knut leaped over him in a single broad-jump and caught him again.

"Please lemme alone," the man said in a piteously childish appeal.

The words struck Knut this time. The man spoke English. A strange dialect of the island tongue, but Knut knew he could make himself understood.

"Have no fear," Knut said, striking the final vowels of the words with a grunting emphasis in the curious brogue of Middle English.

"Christ," the man said, "it's a crazy Irish circus giant."

"Erse?" Knut said, "Nicht I—Dane I be."

"A squarehead," the man said, "A squarehead giant like Barnum and Bailey had in their side show."

"Man," Knut said, "I do not know your words, but you do not tell me how to call you." Knut shook the impolite man remonstratively and decided he had found himself in a degenerate age without manners.

"Harry," the man said, "Harry Breen," and suddenly calmed. The exchange of names was so commonplace that he was reassured. "What's your final handle?" Knut looked blank. "You know, your last name."

"Knut, I am an ogre."

"New Okra, huh," Harry beamed. "What are you some kinda clown wrestler?" Harry Breen's attempt to force his experience into old categories broke down. He looked at Knut carefully, and then shrugged. He had troubles of his own. His car for one. His book for another. He shouldn't have taken all the action he did on a horse at such long odds. He should have figured that the money was being spread by the big boys, that they had themselves a boat race, and that with the fix in, it would be a good time to break some of the little operators. He was a gentle man even though he was carrying the gun. He couldn't pay off, and the boys would really break him. Without the money to pay off what they had coming, they would break him in many little pieces. He groaned.

"And my car's busted too." Knut read the man's fear, and his worry, and he could strongly sense Harry's gentleness.

The bookie was a thin man with a perky bird-like vitality, bright black eyes, and a bravely erect twitching posture. Knut released him and went to the tipped up car. The door lay next to the torn hinges, and he saw how it fitted. It would be easy to fix.

He pushed the torn metal back into place and stretched it as best he could with his fingers. Pulling the edges out in thin flashings at

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the broken joints, he crimped them over and squeezed. The molecules of the metal joined inefficiently under the pressure, but they held. He picked up the door and spread the hinges away from each other and slipped the door back in place. He pushed the hinges back onto their pins and then smoothed out the door flanges he had pushed aside. The door swung easily, and the lock had not been harmed. Knut worked the handle until he had the hang of it, and then softly latched the door.

"I have made it anew," Knut said, and smiled at Harry.

Harry grinned back and thought that this nut wasn't so bad after all. Crazy looking, but not as bad as some of the hoods he knew. All he needed was a haircut and some clothes and he'd get by.

"Now," Harry said, "if we could get the car right side up I could change the tire and get going." Harry pushed against the Buick and started rocking, and Knut turned it over with a single straight-armed movement. The ogre's hand was in front of Harry's eyes, and he looked and boggled. There was a thumb, and three fingers.

"Three fingers," Harry thought. "What's the matter with that?" But the hand looked so natural, it was not injured; it was just the way it had grown.

"I got it," Harry said. "You're a Martian, maybe a Venutian, anyway you're an . . ." —he found the perfect phrase—"an alien being." Harry was pleased, he had just proven that the time he had spent watching television and going to the movies was not wasted. Useful knowledge could be acquired from the most peculiar places.

Knut was not interested in Harry's conclusions. He watched the little man shuck his bright plaid, coarsely woven sport coat and open the trunk. Harry hauled the unfastened spare tire out, and fished amid the tumbled welter of tools and rags for a tire wrench. He went to the blown tire, popped the hub cap, and began loosening the lugs.

Knut saw what had to be done next, and he picked the front of the car up with one hand and removed the wheel with the other. He held it while Harry worried the spare into place and spun the lugs in. Knut set the car down with a sigh. He liked the little man, and now he would be alone again. He might as well go back into the woods.

"He's a circus freak." A tinny voice's high pitch pierced Knut's sensitive ears, and he turned to look at the speaker.

"Isn't he Mommy?" the child said and looked up at her mother in the driver's seat of their car. Knut had not been disturbed by Harry's simple description of his place in the world. The bookie had

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only wanted a way to think about him, but the child was viciously pleased by his difference.

"Probably," the mother said to her little girl in a deeper version of her offspring's voice, "and his keeper should be locked up for letting him run around half naked."

"Locked up," Harry said. "Keeper," and looked at Knut. Harry knew what being locked up meant, and the movies he had seen had taught him how to fulfill his obligations to alien beings.

"Nobody's gonna lock a friend of mine up," Harry said, and with his courage aroused, continued. "Not on some miserable broad like youse sayso."

"Get in New," he said and hesitated, thinking of recovering his gun. "Hell with it," he muttered. It wouldn't have been much use against the mob's boys anyway.

Harry Breen was one of those gentle men who are fascinated by violence, and though violent men are victims of that same fascination, that does not make us all vicious. Harry's interest was in the violence of sports, and he had chosen bookmaking as the only way a man of his physique and temperament could take part in his interest, and now he was much too close to the reality.

The ogre, as most ogres were, was as gentle as Harry, and his mildness was even more a matter of physiology. If you take a creature that requires little food, and with reflexes and senses so quick and adept at finding nourishment that it is rarely frustrated, and combine these characteristics with a strength and toughness so great that it is practically invulnerable to ordinary attack, and whose sexual needs are adjusted to the necessities of replacing the members of a group of relative immortals, you have postulated a creature without the need of rage, or aggression.

Knut and Breen were well met. They were both gentle men, and for the first time the ogre had met a man who was not steeped in a traditional fear of his kind, and the man needed help. He radiated an aura of fear that in the confines of the automobile's metal shell pressed unbearably upon Knut's sensibilities.

Harry looked at the ogre and wondered why he had been moved to help him. He had enough trouble without taking on a monster for a traveling companion. He stole another glance at Knut, and smiled. The ogre was jammed between the dashboard and the seat, his knees were bent almost as high as his slumped head, and his hair was mashed down against his forehead by the car's roof. Harry chortled and said, prodding Knut's arm with his elbow, "If we keep hanging around together, I'll have to get a convertible."

Knut expelled his reflexive snig-

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ger, but he was pleased; the aura of fear was lifting.

Harry had almost forgotten his problems in thinking of his new friend. Getting a convertible was a joke, but the ramifications that the thought led to were not. He could not take Knut to a motel, or a hotel, and he could not turn him loose on the road. He would not be allowed to be free for long. They'd pick him up, and one of the cornerstones of Harry's moral philosophy was that you didn't let your friends get picked up by the fuzz. No cop was going to get the honor of putting Knut in jail as long as Harry Breen was around, thought Harry.

But what to do with him? Harry decided there was only one thing to do, and when he came to the next exit ramp, he turned off the highway and started back to the city. The city was dangerous for him, but the only place he could think of where Knut could be safely hidden was his own apartment.

Harry slid the car into the parking lot at the rear of his building and reached into the back seat. He handed Knut the folded blanket he had bought for amatory emergencies but never used, and said, "Put this around ya, and we'll get inside."

Knut hardly understood the words, but he understood what was wanted of him, so he wrapped the blanket around himself and stepped out of the car looking like a caricature of a comic strip Indian.

Harry and Knut were both so pleased by the communication they thought they had achieved that they had not noticed the heavy pear-shaped man. He stared at the pair and grumbled, "Harry's crazy coming back to town," and shrugged the lapels of the ostentatiously well-cut suit he wore back into place before he slipped a coin out of his pocket and ferreted himself into a sidewalk telephone booth.

Harry's apartment was in a building that had an air of incipient collapse. The marble was peeling from the lobby walls, and the self-service elevator acridly smelled of marijuana, but neither Knut nor Harry had any standard to tell them that it was not perfectly proper.

Even before they were out of the elevator, Harry could hear his phone ringing, and he hurried Knut down the hall, pushed him into the apartment, and apprehensively picked up the receiver.

"No," he said into the mouthpiece, "I ain't taking any action today." He waited, "I dig you're a regular, and I dig I'm into ya for a bundle, but no action today." Harry listened. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, you can go . . ."

He dropped the handset into the cradle. "Lousy two-dollar sport hung up on me," he muttered and turned to Knut and said expansively, "Well, this is my pad—not bad huh?" His social duty performed,

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he pushed the sliding door away from the alcove that held the dish-clogged sink and the refrigerator and pulled two cans of beer out. He popped holes in both, handed Knut one, and drank thirstily.

Knut recognized the can as one of the cylinders he had seen in the forest and was glad to discover its function. Politely following Harry's lead, he drank. The first cold mouthful shocked him, but he soon discovered the taste of small beer and drank the rest of the can with one head-tilted toss.

"I know what we can do with ya," Harry said. "We'll enter ya in one a those college boy chug-a-lug contests." Harry sobered, "But the first thing's a haircut and some clothes because I gotta get out of town!"

Harry thought and remembered the electric hair clippers he had bought in a fit of economy only to discover that a man living alone could not cut his own hair. He got them out and explained to Knut what he was about to do.

"I'm gonna cut your wig." Harry started the clippers into the ogre's matted hair, and the blade shattered after he made a half an inch of progress. Harry dropped the useless implement and again found his courage.

"You stay here buddy," he said, "I'm going out to get some big strong scissors."

Though at this time the ogre was rather stupid in human terms and if you had given him an I.Q. test he would have scored very badly, Knut knew what Harry's intentions were. Knut was not a moron; he was not yet very verbal, but he was very observant. He had seen the city they had driven through, and he had not seen any of the precautions that the people of his waking time had taken against his kind, and the other real dangers that beset them. Although the city streets had been comparatively empty in the morning hour between the start of the workday and the ten o'clock coffee break, Knut had seen how he must look. The clothes the people wore were reasonably loose, their hair was short, and the kind man who had taken him was going to fix him to look like them. The man might not have the knowledge of ogres that Knut thought commonplace, but he seemed to understand their great desire for peace. Knut decided he would not have to go to sleep after all. He remembered Harry's air of trouble and decided that he might be able to help.

Having come to a decision, Knut went to the refrigerator and took another can of beer out. He had a little trouble with the tab, but he persevered, and holding it delicately between his thumb and two of his fingers, he prodded two holes into the can with his little finger. He was prepared for the cold and he drank the beer off quicker than his first. It was weak stuff but it

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was wonderfully pure, not at all like the gruelly mixture he and his friends had made in the forest festivals. He was beginning to be hungry, but he trusted his new-found friend, and he lowered himself into a squat to wait.

Harry came back and ripped the paper from the package he was carrying with frenzied fingers. He unloaded a pair of tin snips and a pair of large tailor's shears onto the coffee table.

Knut looked at him interrogatively, and he said, "We gotta hurry, I think I been spotted. I'm almost sure I seen some muscle of Gianetti's down the street."

"So," Knut said and ruminated the situation over in his mind. He ground the incomprehensible words and the emotion that had accompanied them over slowly, but when he was done he had crushed the information fine enough to know that he could be of help.

Harry began hacking at his hair and talked as he worked. "New, baby," he said in his best imitation of a hip barber's delivery, "we gotta get you fixed up so we can get outta town. I'm gonna get leaned on. Maybe so hard I'll be permanently creased." He dropped the scissors, and took the tinsnips to work at a particularly obdurate tuft of hair. He hacked away in silence for a time and continued in a cheerier voice, "Anyway, with hair like this, I can't goof a bristle cut. I mean it's so tough that I gotta go slow, and before I can goof I got time to think." Harry whistled part of the chorus of "Hardluck Blues" and stopped. "Nerts," he said, "clothes, we gotta have clothes." He tapped his foot, and slowed the clacking rhythm of the shears to half time. "Flo," he said, "I'll call Flo. She useta make costumes, and she's got a portable sewing machine." He dropped the shears to the floor, went to the phone and dialed.

The phone rang several times, and he explained into the air, "She works nights and she sleeps pretty heavy." He was silent again. "Ah, finally. Hello baby." Tapping his foot in exasperation, he waited through a spate of words. "I know you're worried, but listen to me anyway." He waited again, but his exasperation was a pantomime without emotion. "Yeah, me too baby." He looked at Knut and cast his eyes upward and shrugged in embarrassment. "Sure, you know how I feel, but listen, please. Here's what I want you to do." He grinned. "No argument awright? Pick up your sewing machine and stop and get two bolts of cloth." He listened. "Awright not bolts. Get ten yards a somethin' for a man's suit and five yards a somethin' you can make a sorta shirt out of." He was interrupted by a run of words that were pushed out into the room by her agitation. "I know that it sounds nuts, but you promised no arguments. What's-a-matter you haven't got the bread?" He

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waited again. "Awright, awright, I like you too, just do like I say. You got it straight?" He made a kissing sound with his lips and said, "You're coming. Right. Thanks." He hung up and resumed his barbering job. "We'll turn you into a dude yet," he said and began excavating a small copse.

Harry was finished with Knut's haircut and stepped back to admire his handiwork when Flo knocked at the door and said, "It's me."

Harry unlocked the door and reached for the knob, but the man who slammed him backwards with his charging momentum had already prepared the door by turning the latch back. Harry went teetering into the center of the room, wishing he had retrieved his pistol, and the door crasher's companion released Flo's twisted arm and followed him into the room.

"You got sixteen grand, Harry?" he said and shook his head in mock sorrow. "No? That's too bad." He intertwined his fingers and pushed the joined palms away from himself and listened to the crackle of his popping knuckles with a connoisseur's attention. "You know what we're gonna have to do." He walked forward clenching his hands toward the retreating Harry.

"What are we gonna do with the broad?" the man holding the door said and pulled the large blonde woman into the apartment.

"First things first," his companion said and drew his fist back.

Knut had waited to act. He did not know what the men's intentions were. They were so casual about the intended mayhem that he had not recognized their purpose immediately, but finally recognizing them for what they were and voicing his contempt, he attacked his benefactor's foes.

"Whoreson knichts," Knut said and picked both men up simultaneously in the almost tentacular flexibility of his arms. He would have dealt with them as he would have dealt with any other rampaging knight, but he assumed that in this new world the rules were not the same as those he remembered and satisfied himself with jerking the men hard enough to worry them into unconsciousness.

They were not even knights, Knut decided. They were men-at-arms for some petty lord, or landed knight who oppressed the free men who lived within reach of his domains. Ogres had been subjected to calumnies by such men as these and there monkish clerks for years.

The ogres' helpfulness and altruism had been countered by organized campaigns of slander. The peasants and yeomen were told that the ogres had such voracious appetites that they ate men and that their broad ugly visages were outward signs of the cruelty of their spirits. Knut bobbed the bodies of Gianetti's enforcers and debated

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finishing them, but Harry, after the first shock, was so impressed by their handling that he had an idea.

"You seen their car?" Harry turned to Flo, but she could not answer. She stared at Knut and his burden, slack-jawed with complete disbelief.

"Come on, come on." Harry shook Flo's shoulder. "It's OK," he continued, divining Flo's difficulty. "The big guy's a friend of mine." He decided that it would be easier to explain that Knut was an alien being after their business had been accomplished.

"What?" Flo turned her eyes from Knut to the familiar Harry. "Their car? Yeah, I seen their car."

"Good," Harry said, "gimme your lipstick and tell me where it is." The dazed Flo obeyed, and Harry and the ogre left the apartment.

Breen was pleased with the arrangement. The two hoods were stripped to their shorts and lashed with strips torn from their trousers, elbow to elbow across the back of the front seat of their black sedan. Harry had lettered "Jerk" across one man's chest, but the other man's general hairiness had forced him to emblazon the epithet across his forehead. The windows were rolled down, but Knut had mangled the doors into their frames so that they could not be opened without a wrecking bar, while Harry had tastefully draped the men's filled shoulder holsters across the car's hood ornament.

"That oughta make 'em feel good," Harry said, and grinned at Knut.

Knut nodded solemnly. The justice was fitting. Such men as these would not be happy about having been made ridiculous, and if he had killed them, they would have felt nothing.

Flo straightened up from arranging her portable sewing machine and sewing implements on the low coffee table, and twitched the folds out of her red silk dress that had hiked across her ample hips. She folded her arms under her bosom and glared at Harry.

"Well, you're back," she said, and tossed her brassy hair. She smiled at Knut. "Ain't you gonna introduce me?" Flo was not exasperated; she was merely exercising her womanly rights.

"This is New Okra," Harry said. "How about getting on with the threads?"

"I can't make no suit for a guy this size." Flo studied the ogre. "But I got an idea." She turned. "Harry you pull down those curtains."

Harry obeyed Flo's command and unhooked the widely striped decorator burlap drapes that covered the far wall and its single window.

An hour later Knut was dressed in a beach suit and clam diggers. The capri shirt's stripes ran trans-

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versely across his chest and straight down from the wide-scooped neck to the middle of his forearm, where the sleeves ended in a slit. The pants were cut in a zigzag fringe around the bulging bronzed muscles of his calves and were held with a double tie of bright new clothesline slipped through loops.

"Beautiful, Flo," Harry said, and bussed her cheek. "He looks just like one of them guys from the beach."

"Well, I figgered this was the best way," Flo said and bridled pridefully. "After all this is California, and we couldn't pass him off as no normal man. So I made him inta one of them weight lifter nuts."

"It's great baby, but now we gotta get going." Harry turned to Knut, and jerked his thumb at the door.

"You're not leaving without me," Flo said. "I'm not staying in town with Gianetti's boys on a rampage."

Harry thought for a moment. "Yeah," he said decisively. "You're right." He slapped his hip pocket. "I may not have sixteen grand, but I got enough for the three of us."

They drove to Harry's cabin on a lake in the Sierras, and the first thing that Harry said while they were unloading the supplies he had bought was, "The thing we gotta do before we do anything else is teach New how to talk right."

Harry grunted and allowed the ogre to carry the case of beer with which he was struggling. "The way it is nobody can make out nothing he's saying." Flo nodded and led Knut into the cabin. She touched the dust-covered surface of the table and said, "This dump is filthy."

Harry and Knut put the groceries away, and Flo wrapped her head in a bandana and began dusting the furniture. She worked happily and efficiently, gladly showing off her wifely skills for Harry and caught up by the rhythms of the work that pleased her most.

Harry had a plan worked out. "What we're gonna do is start teachin' you right away," he said. "You gotta learn to talk right." He stood straighter and turned the stiff cuff of his new flannel shirt back. "And I'm just the boy to learn ya —everybody says I got a good gift of gab."

The group in the little cabin settled down to a routine of learning, eating and sleeping. They all swam in the cold water of the lake that lay beyond the trees that walled the cabin, and Flo gave up her elaborate makeup and hair rinses and dressed in simple clothes. She wore slacks, and skirts and blouses, and let the sun freckle her unprotected skin. She lost weight from the exercise of swimming and doing housework without the mechanical aids she thought indispensable.

Harry relaxed more and more; his pedagogic success proved his

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intelligence to him, and with pardonable egotism, he credited his teaching more than the intelligence of his pupil for the progress they made.

Knut learned the curious argot derived from the cryptically evolved hermetic communications of jazz musicians and dope addicts with all its obscurities derived from the implicit necessity to exclude the squares from the illegal and esoteric practices of their lives, but he also found time to learn to read.

The cabin held an old unabridged dictionary and a collection of those peculiar novels and biographies that find their only immortality in summer bungalows, and he read and learned the more formal ramifications of English. His spoken conversation was a cacophonic imitation of the underworld, but his internal dialogues were composed in the near Victorian cadences of unremembered middlebrow literature.

Knut sat outside the cabin hunkered in a crouch on the ground with his back against the porch in the fine warm morning and hummed a song deep in his throat. Flo silently came onto the porch behind him, attracted by the melody. He began to sing a war song from the time of the first Caesar aloud in his deep strong voice, but the bawdy words did not fit his feeling for the morning, and the harsh burred Latin did not ring true in the twentieth-century air. He switched to a Celtic war song that told of the Cymry and sang the lilting language in the highest baritone he could muster.

"That's a pretty song," Flo said. "Can you sing it in English?"

Knut thought for a moment and sang to a tune that gamboled in baroque counterpoint the words of the first verse.

"In this song now I sing
of when Artos was the king,
and gentle Christ wiped away
the cruelties of the corn king
sway."

He launched into the chorus with a harder rhythm than the ballad form of the verse, and tapped his foot, singing:

"O swing your sword for British
peace
and let our voices never cease."

He stopped, Flo was not paying attention. "You're hip this is an old song," Knut said deprecatingly. "Like it's better than a thousand years old." Flo was staring at the trees, and he said, "What's-a-matta, baby, you got the blues?"

"Yeah," Flo said, "It's Harry, he's starting to worry about that money he owes."

"I can fix that," Knut said and straightened to his full height.

"Oh not that," Flo said. "I mean he's not scared. It preys on his mind that he didn't pay off. Gianetti's bunch are a bunch of bums, but Harry never welched before, and he don't like it." She subsided with a sigh.

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"How does this horse race bit work anyway?" Knut asked.

Flo explained the sport of kings with economy. "Well, if you put your money on a horse, and the horse wins, and too many other cats haven't got their bread down on the same pig, you can win ten, twenty times what you put down." She reflected, "Maybe more."

Knut thought, and then phrased his conclusion in the language of his thinking. "Then the winning depends upon the excellence of the beast. The better horse must win?"

"I guess so," Flo said, not seeing the direction of Knut's reasoning.

"Can the money be wagered at the places where the horses race?" Knut asked, but Flo looked at him blankly, and he reworded his question. "Can you bet the pigs at the track?"

"Of course," Flo said, amazed at his ignorance.

"Then," Knut said, "by Woden's crows I swear we will win much." He grinned and rumbled his bass titter. "Let's go talk it up to Harry."

Harry protested, but the pressure of the ogre's mind, and the combined weight of Knut's two vocabularies soon silenced his objections. To Harry the plan seemed to be basically sound: after all the way to make money was on the races; there was no better way. You took bets or you made them, all other ways of earning a living were mysterious, square, or the result of inheritance.

Harry was nervous. He was used to the churned muddy soil of the streets and lanes between the neat painted clapboards of the low racehorse barns, but it was a bad place. Even this early in the morning there was a chance of meeting someone who had a connection with Gianetti. One of the touts, or handlers and exercise boys who were part-time touts would have heard about the small-time bookie who owed Gianetti money, and it was a good idea to be in with Gianetti.

Harry shivered, more from apprehension than from the coolness of the morning air, and looked at Knut for reassurance. The ogre walked on the sandals Flo had made for him out of sections of birch trees and braided rawhide boot laces, in complete silence. He sniffed the winy stink of feed and manure with intoxicated enjoyment, and his ears moved to pick up the tight sounds of horses stirring muscles that were unwilling to awake. It was hard to feel the horses' minds with the pall that Harry's fear cast over their auras, and he turned to the little man.

"Don't be so hung up, baby," Knut said. "There's nobody here but us chickens," and Harry believed him, the ogre was so positive, so attuned to the air that he could not doubt. He relaxed and said, "Neat, none of them hoods would be up this early." He fell into the calmness Knut generated, and added, "I mean this isn't their scene."

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Harry set the lapels of his coat with the hard decision of a tough movie prize fighter and followed Knut, trying to place his feet with the same flat-footed, bearish silence as the ogre. They took step after step in unison, marching with dreamlike slowness between the stalls. Knut stopped from time to time when a stronger impression reached his mind, but the halts fitted their rhythm and did not interrupt the smoothness of their progress.

"I'm about done, Harry," Knut said. "I got these pigs taped." He turned back down the aisle of barns and led Harry in a twisting path between the buildings that had them back to the car in a few minutes.

Flo awoke from a restless doze behind the wheel of the Buick and looked up at Harry and Knut. Without any pause for recognition she said, "If we're going to the track this afternoon, we're gonna have to give him another haircut, and I'm gonna have to get my hair done." She scissored the gold fringe of her straw blonde hair between her fingers and flappped it at Harry. "Let's go, huh?" She had the engine started and the sun turned the grey of the dawn smog into a dull red haze as they climbed into the car.

Though there were still reservations in Harry's mind, the pressure of Knut's mental abilities kept them stilled. The light-washed atmosphere of the track and the hullabaloo of the crowd erased the last vestige of doubt. After all, he reasoned, the way to make money was on the races; there is no better way.

Harry sniffed the air, and stared at the familiar scene with pleasure. The air under the grandstand was blasted full of light from the glaring ceiling full of fluorescent fixtures, and the sun reflected from the concrete and the heads of the crowd. He swiveled, and was reassured by the sight of the tote board players that Knut was, after all, not so strange in this crowd. The first race had just been paid off, and he saw one of the tote board players gesturing with both hands —the right full of a folded and crumpled wad of money in bills of large denominations and his left hand waving a fanned, green stack of combination tickets. The man wore a suede frontier jacket with gaps in the fringing, and around his neck hung an expensive pair of American binoculars held up with twisted butcher's string. Mottled o.d. fatigue pants sagged over a pair of unpolished and scuffed Wellington boots, but they were still obviously expensive, and the man held several thousand dollars negligently in his hand.

"That," Harry said to the ogre, "is a horseman." Knut looked at him blankly. "No," Harry explained, "he's not no horse—he's an owner, and he's a tote player. He's betting the board according to a system

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that follows the late money." Knut still looked unenlightened. "He bets the long shots the big money hits by watching the last total on the board that registers the handle."

"The handle?" Knut asked, and Harry said, "Yeah, the money that's bet on each horse."

"Crazy," Knut said, and looked out into the sunlight. The track was very pleasant he thought; the air was full of anticipatory tensions of both the winners and the losers, but the two vibrations were not so different—they both waited for the future, and ignored the past whether it had been good or bad. There were some few auras that did not please him. They were cold, and nervously cruel. They were the broadcast thoughts of the men who were in the crowd with a calculating purpose that he did not understand.

If Knut had asked Harry what the function of the coldly watchful men in the crowd was, he would have been told that they were there to control the odds within the minute limits decided by a computor that enabled the crime syndicate's national betting organization to be sure of a profit. Knut would have thought that the process was dangerously close to the sin of usury, but Harry would have shrugged it off with the explanation that the syndicate did no more than the pari-mutuel machines that one bet against at the track.

The reveries of both the male members of the group were interrupted by Flo. "Let's go get a hot-dog and a beer," she said. "I'm starved."

Harry knew they formed too obvious a group. Flo, larger than he, with newly plated hair, he small with a nervous bouncing walk, and Knut's enormous bulk, but the thoughts damped in Knut's confidence were not strong enough to trigger adrenalin into his blood. He led them through the crowd with confidence and spoke, "That's what they got the best of at the track—hot dogs. You know, you forget what's good sitting hung up behind a telephone every day—all day." He dug a sharp elbow into Flo's ribs, and she smiled agreement as they drew up in front of the refreshment stand.

"Three dogs. No, you better make it six with everything," Harry said grandly to the young girl with her open mouth pale behind her white lipstick. Harry paid the three dollars with a flourish, and the girl hurriedly jettisoned her load into Knut's hand at the end of the arm he stretched over Flo's shoulder.

"You can't buy beer at the same stand," Harry explained. "We gotta go over this way."

Harry led the way, and Knut's nostrils had time to sort the separated odors from under the smell of mustard and spices. He touched Harry with his free hand, and not getting his attention, hooked him to a stop with his forefinger.

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Harry looked up champing his jaws in anticipation. "You and Flo gonna scarf all these dogs?" Knut asked.

"Naw," Harry said, "four of them's for you."

"Well, I can't Harry." Knut gave vent to his giggling temblor. "Not and be able to think about horses."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "That's the best thing at the track—the hot dogs."

"That's all right, Harry," Flo said. "We'll throw them all away."

"It is not so much that I suffer an excess of refinement to the nature of animal meats. It is merely the situation in which I find them that I find offen . . ." Knut stopped, his aural radar had been blocked for a moment by the association of the sausage and his gaffe, and now he was thankful that Flo and Harry found his second vocabulary almost incomprehensible.

"Would you listen to that?" a blonde who was an attenuated copy of Flo's opulence said to her companion.

"Listen to what?" The sandy man in English tweeds lifted his head from his program. "I'm trying to handicap the first race."

"To what that grotesque said." The woman pointed at Knut's retreating figure.

"My god," the man said, and touching a light brown mustache that blended into the freckled fold of his cheeks, he studied the ogre with interest.

"Come on," he said, and pulled the woman after him. He found a clear aisle of view and inspected the group.

"You're great," he said to the blonde, who was tossing her head to flip her straightened hair back into its ironed fall.

"First you pull my arm off—then you say I'm great," she said, but he wasn't listening.

"Come on," he said, "I've got to find a phone."

"What about the first race?" she said.

"The hell with the first race." He paused and shoved a handful of money from his side jacket pocket into her hand, and said, "You put the bets down." He left totally immersed in his search. Gianetti would let him off the hook for this favor; all he had to do was find a phone booth.

The vulpine blonde's muzzle followed his departure. Her fingers flickered as she counted the money in her hands, and then she turned to the exit.

"He was a loser anyhow," she said, and expertly moved through the would-be admirers among the late arriving bettors in an insulating bubble of cold self-awareness.

Knut, Harry and Flo carried their paper containers of beer to the rail to watch the post parade. Knut handed Harry his drink, and moved away down the rail. He mewed softly in his throat, and listened to the blowing and whin-

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nies. He could not talk to the horses, but he could excite them with the ancestrally fearful sound of saber-toothed impatience and hear their emotions and confidence.

He moved back to Flo and Harry and said, "The horse with the black- and puce-attired rider is the most likely to succeed."

His pronouncement was greeted with blank stares.

"The pig whose boy's wearing black and red threads."

"That's silks," Harry corrected.

"What's it make?" Knut said. "It's almost a sure thing. But I can make a . . ."—without a term to describe his two-way rapport, he hesitated but pushed on—"noise that will guarantee the race."

"I don't fix it for no horse to win," Harry said. "I'd be just like that bum Gianetti."

"Well there are two horses," Knut said, "but the black and red's best."

"We'll bet them both to win," Harry said. "Which is the other one?"

"Frostbitten citron and brown," Knut said and corrected himself. "Orange and brown."

Harry's confidence was slightly shaken; Knut should have been surety itself, but Flo steered him firmly to the one hundred dollar win booth, and the ogre trailed behind. He felt strange. His perceptions were not dulled, but something was different. His appetite was larger than he remembered, and he almost wished he had eaten the hot dogs.

When they returned to the rail, they leaned against the criss-crossed wires of the cyclone fence and watched the handlers and jockeys guide the horses into the stalls in the starting gate. An amplified trumpet pealed and a plump voice announced that it was five minutes to post time for the first race. The voice had hardly finished when a loud series of bells clamored for the shutdown of the parimutuel ticket machines.

Knut started and tried to find a place to rest his hands amid the trimmed ends of the fencing wire where it was bound to the top rail. The spaces between the clipped spikes were not arranged for his fingers, and he laid his hands lightly over the points.

A single great electric bell reverberated, and the horses boomed out of the suddenly sprung gates. They leaped away with Knut's horse running dead last, but the horse rapidly drew up with the forefront of the trailing group in a frenzied crab-gaited dash that ripped a disgusted "Oh no" from Harry's throat. The jockey leaned his puce head forward, and the horse drew ahead of the gaggle of losers and settled into a long loping gallop that rapidly closed the ground between him and the horse that was Knut's alternate choice. When he crossed under the wire a full head in front, the result

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seemed so inevitable that Harry and Flo merely nodded and smiled at one another.

"Should we collect?" Flo asked.

"We'll have to—we need some operation money for the next race."

Knut was still staring at the track. A calm monolith left by the withdrawing wavelets of the crowd. He relaxed the massive emotional control he had been holding on himself and lifted his hands away from the flattened points and finger grips he had left along the steel rail.

"We win," Harry said, looking at the tote board. "We win," he said more loudly in an awed tone. "And he pays twenty-eight eighty."

Flo gulped and roared, "And you had," she lowered her voice and looked around, "two hundred dollar tickets on him."

"That's almost three g's," Harry said.

"But," the ogre said, turning his large grin on them, "we have to subtract the two hundred we bet on the other pig to win."

"Nuts," Harry said. "Look at it this way." He spread his hands and shrugged. "Come on." He started for the payoff windows. "We gotta get our dough so we can bet again." He explained as he walked, "Look at it this way. If the next win we make pays a lousy six to one," he turned to Flo, "that's a twelve dollar payoff." He smiled and did a quickstep that almost tripped him over Knut's feet.

"Well, anyways, that's enough to be ahead of what I need for Gianetti, and then I'm through."

"Through?" Flo asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Through. I'm quitting. I'm through with gambling, and booking and . . ." He hesitated and finally found the words and spoke them with a curious precision. "And I'm starting afresh."

They went to collect the money in a chortling little group, but when they had worked their way past a series of windows with increasing payoff prices, they came to an alcove backed with a grey steel door that was marked $100 PAYOFF ONE PERSON ADMITTED AT A TIME. They conferred silently, and Harry aljusted his lapels and went in.

They waited for what seemed to be hours and Flo clutched at Knut's elbow as time went on. The few passersby slowed as they passed the pair, and one man stopped and watched them for a time, but Flo and Knut kept their eyes on the door. Flo only knew two kinds of metal doors, those that led to cellblocks and those that led to clubs that catered to bizarre tastes or a propensity for late hours, and she worried. Knut kept his eyes on the door because nothing else in the green-painted concrete corridor attracted his interest.

Harry emerged with his features drawn into tight, harried lines.

"Christmas," he said in a high

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child's voice. "There was a Fed in there." He shuddered. "He was a tax man." Flo put her hand on his arm. "Don't worry, all he did was take the government's cut, but he wanted my address and my Social Security number so I could get credit," Harry quoted, "toward my retirement benefit." He grinned. "Where the hell would I get a Social Security number? I never worked at no square job in my life." He said it with pride.

Flo asked. "What did you tell him?"

"Well," Harry answered, "I would have made one up, but I didn't know how many numbers those things got in them. So I told him I couldn't remember." Harry walked away. "Well at least I got the dough, and all we need is one more good horse."

They walked back along the corridor past the simpler and cheaper payoff windows for the cheaper players. Three men followed them, the sandy man walked between two men whose narrow-shouldered mohair suits obliterated his tweeds with their aggressive expensiveness. One of the shining-suited men turned to their guide. "Mr. Gianetti says you can forget the little matter of your indebtedness to him. He likes to reciprocate in the case of favors." He turned to his assistant dismissing his auditor with an inattention so fine that the sandy man seemed to melt into the contours of the thickened crowd around the two dollar payoff windows. The dark-suited man bent his dark seal's head close to his companion's and said, "Where do you think it would be best to do this job of work?" He patted the side of his jacket smooth where it had been disarranged in passing contact with a fat woman in a formidably starched housedress.

His companion politely waited for him to rearrange his clothes, and answered, "In my opinion the parking lot would be the best choice.

"This is true," the other man answered, and they prowled after Harry's group, their feet, in black glove leather shoes, coming down in unison. They were both medium-sized men, and now that they were in movement they passed through the eddies in the crowd without friction.

Knut felt that there was something wrong, but he was distracted by the concentration necessary to prepare himself to read the next post parade, and by the pleasantly unpleasant sensations that rose from glandular sources he could not shut off. He caught the musky natural perfume of the women about him under the inaccurate chemical compositions of their flower perfumes, and he found the scents newly disturbing. He looked at Flo, but it was certainly not Harry's girl friend that made his skin loosen and tighten as if a myriad of small muscles had loosed

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a rebellion. Knut searched the air distractedly, and trapped by the circumstance that links the inevitability of physical readiness to its own instant, he found the cause of his need.

More than six feet off the floor, for a wrenching instant seeming propped above the crowd, he saw a head topped with pre-Raphealite hair, a Burne-Jones virgin's head, with straight black hair falling in perfect symmetry from a part as precisely in the middle of her hair as a north-man's two handed axe stroke. Over her shoulder she carried an instrument that Knut took to be a large lute, holding it with a hand trimmed with natural fingernails. Knut started in her direction, and saw her turn her head toward him and grin widely. She had a high forehead, a wide mouth, and a rather broad nose, but her eyes were milkmaid blue. He almost did not answer her smile, but finally he grinned widely and thankfully in greeting.

Harry looked up at Knut. "Come on, come on, we're gonna miss the horses pass for the second race if you don't get a hurry on," he said, and bounced forward with quick short steps that swiveled him around the clotted flow of the crowd.

As the horses drew closer, Knut found that it was not necessary for him to arouse their fear. He could feel their emotions, with a newly heightened awareness. This time he was perfectly sure of the winner; he felt the horses' lives as a timeless continguous whole: from foal to full growth, each horse's history and self-regard was assimilated and became part of a surety so deep that it could only be called cellular.

He almost blurted the news to Harry, but he restrained himself. First Harry had to be adjusted. Knut directed a wave of truth and belief at the bookie, and Harry achieved a graceful relation with Knut; he was full of the meat of infused contemplation. Knut was embarrassed by the mystically theological tenor of his definition, but he knew no other terms.

"Baby," Knut said, "we got it made." He grinned. "We can't miss." He pointed. "It's the jock with the red and blue what's topping our little winner."

Harry dove into his program. "Well," he said, after a moment of consideration, "the horse will pay some more than we need." He pinched the full underside of Flo's arm. "But what the hey, it'll pay the taxes." Harry whirled. "You two wait here. I'll make the bet, and be back."

Knut found a reverie that was not based in times past. He saw the girl, or was it woman, with the long hair. The center part tenderly exposed her white scalp, and he felt the fragility of humankind with helpless concern. Ogres had, he remembered, in times past been ac-

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cused of stealing maidens—but for what reason? Knut slapped his thigh and raked a hand through his cropped mane. He was a fool. There were no females of his race, and he was not truly immortal. There even had been a Danish chieftain called Giant Knut, Knut den Storer, a great tall ugly man born of woman, and out of a strong race of great tall ugliness. He himself had not changed so much as merely grown older. It was true that the industrial gases, the nitrous and other oxides breathed out by hundreds of automobiles, and the whines and hisses of the electrical energies ravaging through light tubes and the air made him use more effort to keep his wide spectrumed world open, but his glands had altered the balances of their secretions, and his dense flesh was growing lighter with the sweet liquors that Chaucer had found in April.

Full of himself, Knut did not look around until the horses were crossing the finish line, and he saw that their horse had won.

"We win," Flo said, "but where's Harry?"

"He probably thought it'd be easier to go right up and collect," Knut said, and smiled to think that anyone could find quiddities in a perfect world, but soon he was worrying himself. The crowds had mostly vanished into the shadow of the grandstand, and Harry had not returned.

"We'll check by the payoff place," Knut said. "He's bound to be there collecting our winnings."

"Well," Flo twisted her neck to look up at Knut, "he said he'd be back." She looked at the paper litter on the concrete. "I should have gone along and watched him."

"Quis custodeit ipsos custodes," Knut growled the words in the dog latin of a colonial soldier.

"Well," Flo said, "don't swear. I'm worried is all. You know Harry, when he says he'll be back, he should be back. He's faithful."

The last words, trumpet partials sounding the responsibilities of honor, brought Knut back from the sedations of his sudden and thorough puberty. He reached out into the chaotic smear of emotions around them, and grabbed Flo's arm. "Come on," he said, and stifled Flo's protest by explaining, "There's trouble." He clenched his free hand. "Somebody's got Harry."

Flo could barely keep up with the ogre, but she kicked off her high-heeled strap-woven shoes and ran at his side with a surprising economy of hip movement. They turned down the long green concrete corridor, bleakly lined with stressed concrete support members, and started toward the one hundred dollar payoff sign.

Knut stopped. "It's no good," he said. "Harry's not down there. We gotta try somewheres else."

They went back into the crowd, and Knut straightened himself as

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tall as was possible, but he could see nothing to help them. He growled, "Jeg skull be morder." He swivled his head again, and saw the maiden of the long straight hair frantically beckoning him to her. His first thought was that he had no time for such games, but he dismissed it as unworthy, and cleaved a quick passage through the thin crowd.

The girl wasted no time. "You're looking for your friend," she said with perfect certainty.

Knut nodded, anxious for Harry, but overcome with pleasure at her perception.

"I saw him," she said, and smiled with overwhelming empathy. "He didn't look happy." She paused, and said with a distasteful grimace, "He was walking between two shiny little men."

"Where?" Knut said, and the girl drew back for a moment before the ferocious concentration of his need.

"Toward the parking lot," she said.

Knut debated leaving Flo for a split second, then gathered her under an arm and made off at a run.

He put her down when they reached the flat asphalt space of the parking lot and squinted into the glittering haze of light reflected from tops of thousands of cars. "There," he said, and he whooped "Harry!" in a long ululation that brought the tiny distant trio to a halt.

Pushing Flo to a position at his side, and partially behind him, to protect her, he moved toward them at a slower pace.

They came up to the waiting men, and the more important of the shining twins said to his companion, and to a rhetorical alter ego, "What do you know—a little gravy. The big guy brought the broad to us." He smiled at his companion.

"Coxcomb," Knut snorted.

"What'd he call you?" the second twin asked with a giggle.

"What's the difference," the leader said. "We'll take care of him and then enjoy our gravy. I mean there's no telling what a broad and a guy will do for you when they think they've got a chance of living a few minutes longer." As he talked he surveyed the arena and misread Knut's tense immobility. He decided that there was no reason to take the noisy chance of using his gun and reached behind his head and threw his hideaway stiletto with a snake-like whiplash of his arm and torso. Normally Knut would have taken his time and avoided the knife, but he feared for Harry and Flo. The ogre bobbed slightly and bounded forward with the thin-bladed knife quivering between the corded fibers of his shoulder muscle. The pain had activated Knut, and he screamed a reverberating basso cry that echoed from the grandstand as he leaped. The second man had

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his gun out, but Knut batted the knife wielder into him, and the two went down in a single still heap. Knut opened his mouth wide, and would have made the legend of the ogres' taste for human flesh true, but a sweet voice stopped him.

"You're hurt," it said, and Knut was suddenly and weakly calm. He quickly plucked the knife from his shoulder, not wishing to offend such tender eyes, and turned to the tall girl. The girl pulled his shirt away from the small wound, and he let it bleed. She was dabbing at the cut with a large white handkerchief, and he wished to enjoy the delicious ministrations.

"It is not necessary," he said proudly. "I am little hurt." He grinned down at the girl. "If you would tell me your name, I would be cured."

She smiled back. "Inge," she said, and thought better. "It's really Ingeborg."

"Ingeborg." Knut sang the name with its proper cadences. "It is a good name to put into a song of double victory."

"Double victory?" Ingeborg asked, but she was not arch.

"I have beaten the whoreson knechts at their own game," Knut said. "I have both won the battle, and have a lady fair." He grunted. "Without having to carry her off to a dank cavern filled with bones, and broken skulls."

"You *are* an ogre," she said laughingly, and Knut smiled. "I will explain better as we go," he said.

By the time Flo had untangled herself from Harry, the pair had vanished into the afternoon.

"Look," Harry said to the objecting customer, "you don't like what I got on the color tee-vee don't drink in my joint." He turned to his waitress. "Right, Flo?"

The customer shrugged his shoulders at the little man's belligerence. "All I said was, 'You don't look like the type who digs that hootnanny stuff.'"

"Well," Harry was sheepish; he filled the man's glass and waved the money away, "most of the time I don't, but I owe everything to New Okra up there. I mean he fixed me up with the bread to buy this place." He pointed to the pair on the screen. "And you gotta admit that the broad up there can really play that twelve-string steel." The customer nodded. "And who should know more old songs than the big guy?" He spread his arms. "Right?"

"Right," Flo said, and a great basso voice sang the opening bars of a Finnish beer-making song. Knut sang the words of the Upsgarn eddo in his deep orge's voice, and smiled his man's smile at his wife Ingeborg's guitar where it rested on her growing belly. ◄

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BOOKS

IN THE HEART OF PENNSYLvania, at a famous university, there is a man who teaches a (full credit) course called *Prophecy and Prediction*. This is even more extraordinary than it sounds, because—in direct violation of all established institutional practice—Professor Philip Klass is not only peculiarly well-equipped to teach such a subject, but it was precisely because of his demonstrated ability to practice prophecy commercially that his lack of some of the more ordinary academic qualifications was considered immaterial when he was invited to join the faculty of the English Department at Penn State.

That is to say, he happens to be an outstandingly good science fiction writer—and please note I said *prophet*, not prophesier. He is not an Elder Statesman of Space, one of those proto-engineers who, in a sense, *invented* space travel and atomic power (and television, and a number of other pleasant and unpleasant facts of modern life) in the early "scientifiction" magazines. When his first story was published, in 1946, most of these items were already on—or on their way to—the drawing boards of the "real" engineers (who—like Klass—had received much of their education and inspiration from those pre-designers of the thirties and early forties). But while the Young Engineers were applying themselves to the task of turning other men's *predictions* into everyman's artifacts, the Young Writer, calling himself "William Tenn," set himself a course of apprenticeship in the rather more outre business of *prophecy*.

Professor Klass today makes a sharp distinction between the two words, and I am not at all certain that my definitions match his. I am only sure—after reading (the new and re-reading the old in) the six volumes just released by Ballantine in "celebration of William Tenn"—that by *my* definition he learned his trade brilliantly. I find myself as much impressed today by the accumulated work as I was twenty years ago by the marvelously inventive and richly comic young writer (who was two—light—years and nine published stories ahead of me at the time). But I am impressed now by different stories (few of them written then),

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and for different reasons.

The specialty s-f field—like most ingrown enclaves, I suppose—has had an unhappy history of glorifying its best writers to destruction. In 1948, William Tenn had already established himself not only as a lightning innovator and bang-up story-teller, but as one of the rarest birds on the science fiction horizon, a true humorist. (In 1949, "Venus and the Seven Sexes" set him beyond doubt in a Klass of his own.) Retrospectively, I suspect that this early image as First Funnyman of Fantasy did his later reputation—and quite possibly his writing as well—incomparable damage. Certainly, it seems probable that some of his long silences in recent years have resulted at least in part from an editorial and critical reluctance to relinquish an image long since grown constrictingly smaller-than-life. I hope, now that he seems to be producing again, that the large-but-misbegotten effort Ballantine is making to contain the old image in a—wildly, absurdly—inappropriate new one (Rediscovered Primitive) does not result in similar damage.

The six books just issued consist of Tenn's only novel, OF MEN AND MONSTERS, published in full for the first time, and five short story collections: OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS (hereafter mostly, APW) and THE HUMAN ANGLE (THA) are reissues of collections first published in 1955 and 1956; THE WOODEN STAR (TWS), THE SEVEN SEXES (TSS), and THE SQUARE ROOT OF MAN (SRM), are new selections of pieces originally published between 1946 and 1967. At a total price of $4.50 for the six books—one novel, one novella, one critical essay, nine novelettes, and 34 short stories—there is a prodigious amount of good reading here. Unfortunately, there is also an unpardonable scattering of the author's commercial apprenticeship efforts spread through all five books—unpardonable, that is, when so many of his better stories were incomprehensibly omitted ("Firewater," for instance, or "Time Waits for Winthrop"). Also—

Although the three new volumes lay claim to (a faintly discernible) thematic arrangement of material, they seem rather to have been laid out primarily so that each one would contain at least one-each of the varieties of Tenn: a time story, a space story, a gag story, a sociological story, a prophetic story, a weird-fantasy, a satire. And—

Although the set is "matched" in external appearance, it is anything but uniform in layout and internal design. One volume has title pages for each story; one starts each new title on a right-hand page; two begin each story on a new page, left *or* right—although with radically different

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type sizes and page design; and one—) Well, one would think that at 75¢ a book, Ballantine might—at least—have added a contents page to the old plates of THE HUMAN ANGLE.

Finally, there is the matter of those matched packages.

My own Rediscovery of Tenn—through these volumes—makes me want to be as charitable as possible to their publishers. But I really do not know whether it is more unkind to believe that blind editorial insensitivity or shortsighted commercial motivations were responsible for either the peculiar selection and arrangement of stories, or ridiculously misleading cover designs. Let me in any case make very clear to those who are not already familiar with his work, that William Tenn is not (and never has been) remotely related to E. R. Burroughs, E. R. Eddison, J. R. Tolkien, or any other of Ballantine's high-camp Pop-pop best-selling Reconstructed Escapist Era fantasists. Nor, despite the turn-of-century lettering and vaguely-sentimental - lurid - stained - glassy art, does he even slightly resemble Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle, Clark Ashton Smith, or Abe Merritt.

The fact is, Tenn's work, at its best (or even its high-grade median) resembles absolutely nothing written by anyone else. None of it is easy to describe, and the best is impossible. One can say a few things in general: that some of the concepts and moods are so immediately contemporary as to be frightening—considering that all but a handful of these stories were written more than thirteen years ago; that the satire at its most effective is an unforgettable, nearly unforgivable, fusion of savagery and tenderness; that the pure strain of Tenn *humor* (as distinguished from satire, or gags) is as unique, individual, unpredictable, and irresistible as—well, there is only one modern standard for this kind of thing—CATCH-22.

One would have to add, on the debit side, that some of the best-remembered stories ("Child's Play," "Errand Boy," "The House Dutiful," all in TSS) are actually more joyously memorable than happily re-readable: that it was, apparently, the brilliance of concept rather than the excellence of execution that made these early stories so successful. Yet, long before he hit his real *literary* stride, Tenn's eye and ear were so acute than in even the most improbable and overplotted stories, there are always a few characters who ring so true, who feel so right, that one reading is all the story will ever need to fix it forever in mind.

Three other stories of the fourteen included (altogether) from Tenn's first five years, are equally memorable, and considerably more re-readable: "Venus and the Seven Sexes," also in TSS, somehow man-

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ages to be funnier than ever, and the razor-edged nail on the finger it points at Hollywood is, if anything, doubly sharp now that television has replicated the whole spectrum of film foolishnesses; "Brooklyn Project" (TWS) has yet to be surpassed as a time-trap story, and has rarely been equalled as satire on the Security Syndrome; and I cannot think of a president or presidential candidate, from 1952 to date, who does not show up (very much put down) in the 1950 election-year-story-for-all-election-years, "Null-P" (TWS).

In any comprehensive sense, Tenn did not hit his "literary stride" until 1954; I think "Down Among the Dead Men" (APW) from that year can stand as the story that marks (with a WOW!) the emergence of his mature powers as a writer. Several titles from the early fifties are indicative of the gathering strength, each in different ways—most notably "The Jester" (SRM) "Betelgeuse Bridge" (TWS), and "Everybody Loves Irving Bommer" (APW). Two other titles from the same period, however, can stand on their own, still, with the best work the field has seen: the (two ways) prophetic story, "Generation of Noah" (besides offering the earliest example —1951—of what Tenn could achieve as he brought all his facets into coordinated control) chilled, warmed, frightened, exalted, reminded, warned, amused, and excited me—all over again—as few stories have done since; and "The Liberation of Earth" (APW) is a tour de force every bit as effective now as when it first appeared.

If you pass up all the rest, get these two books at least: THE WOODEN STAR (with "Eastward Ho!", the controversial "The Masculinist Revolt," and five others in addition to those mentioned above) and OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS (with Tenn's thoughtful and provocative essay, "On the Fiction in Science Fiction," as well as four more short stories). On second thought—or is it third?—you cannot really bypass THE SEVEN SEXES (with "Bernie the Faust," "Sanctuary," "The Malted Milk Monster," and "Mistress Sary" all in it besides the four mentioned earlier).

Of course if you're buying four anyhow, you might as well have the set. But if the extra buck-and-a-half is too much, try to get away with reading at least "The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway" in THA, and "My Mother Was a Witch" in SRM. I mean, when you're paying for four out of six, even a newsdealer, let alone a bookstore man, ought to let you have that much *lagniappe*. And the sixth title *is* one you'll want.

OF MEN AND MONSTERS is the full story of the young man known as Eric the Eye, whose initiation rites into the adult world of Man-

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kind (consisting of 128 people) were described in the *Galaxy* novelette, "The Men in the Walls," in 1963. (The original story is now the first of three parts in the novel.) It is a rich mixture of anthropology, poetry, prophecy, and adventure—the story of the turning-point in the future of (what we *now* call) mankind, whose remnants, at the opening of the story, are scattered in degenerated tribal groupings, living a ratlike existence in the walls and floorings of the monstrous houses of alien invaders of Earth. Out of the conflicts of traditions and superstitions (Ancestor Science and Alien Science; the warriors and thieves of the Male Societies and food-processors and omen-tellers of the Female Societies; "Mankind" itself and the "Strangers": back-burrowers, outlaws, and the legendary Aaron People) in a time of desperation, a new human society is patched together, to mount a distinctively Tennian return invasion.

The book has everything one might expect—wealth of invention, perfection of pace, solidity of structure, consistency, craftsmanship, giggles, and *prophecy*. If it disappointed me somewhat, it may have been just the lack of freshness stemming from the long time between the writing of the beginning and its completion—or it may have been the equally long time between my *reading* of the beginning and of the rest (I am a bad serial-reader, and I ordinarily take pains to avoid reading in the magazines the earlier or partial versions of anything I think I may later be called upon to review in book form).

It is, in any case, the first novel we have had from a unique, and uniquely *readable,* writer: as it stands, it is easily one of the best of 1968, and one hopes it is a promise of much more, soon. At the very least, the book manages to do what no more than a handful of writers—new or old—on the current scene can do: to combine narrative excitement with sophisticated, entirely contemporary, meaning.

Of that handful, one of the most distinguished, and certainly the most practiced, is Fritz Leiber, whose SWORDS OF LANKHMAR (Ace, 60¢) can no more be considered just as a "Sword and Sorcery" novel than OF MEN AND MONSTERS is simply a "catastrophe" story.

There are a number of curious parallels (and inversions) between the two books. For one thing, Leiber too has some men in the walls—but most of them are (any way you look at it) rats. Here, too, are small cooperating-while-competing tribal groups summing up in tiny numbers all of mankind: here too is an island universe in which parables enact themselves; here too is a constant contrast/comparison/

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questioning of the roles of science, magic, and tradition.

And, as it happens, here too the novel grew out of a comparatively remote magazine novelette—"Scylla's Daughters" in *Fantastic* in 1961. If it does not seem to suffer from that fact to the same extent as the Tenn book, it may be simply because Leiber has been writing about Fafhrd and Mouser so long that *they* have, in a sense, learned to grow along with him.

Or it might be simply that the novel is not attempting to do anything as profound and complex as OF MEN AND MONSTERS. Which is not to say there is anything superficial about SWORDS OF LANKHMAR—except its surface.

There can be very few readers by now who are not familiar to some extent with Nehwon, the bubble-universe of Lankhmar, Quarmall, Ilthmar, the Sinking Land, the Salt Marsh, and the Frozen Sea, inhabited by Fafhrd, the giant red-beard barbarian-from-the-North, and the slim swift stealthy leather-clad dirksman, the Gray Mouser, as well as a variable population of Mingols, Ghouls, sorcerers, princes, sailors, warriors, dragons, rats, cats, and other miraculous creatures, not least of which is the endless supply of beautiful maidens either in, or distributing, distress.

Well, *this* time there is a marvelously seductive albino rat-girl and her evil merchant father, who are leading a revolution of the rats in Lankhmar Below, plotting to seize power from the decadent sadist-effeminate Glipkerio, Overlord of Lankhmar Above. For Leiber-lovers, it is enough to say that this book bears about the same relation to the early adventures of Fafhrd and Mouser as "The Night He Cried" did to Mickey Spillane—or perhaps more accurately, THE WANDERER to a book by Louis Adamski. For anyone unfortunate enough not to know Leiber, or to those who (like myself) ordinarily avoid Swords-and-Sorcery by *anybody*, I can only say:

Try it. You may be surprised.

(And add, to those with weak stomachs: Forget it. You may be *too* surprised.)

Meantime, one can dream of the book that (after all) *might* come along (next year? the year after?) with Tenn's careful craftsmanship and literary balance, Leiber's vitality and lusty-gusto—*and* the narrative power and piercing intelligence of either one.

Or, on (what is it? fourth?) thought, there is a further factor, present in both these books, which is essential with all the rest: otherwise, Joanna Russ' PICNIC ON PARADISE (Ace, 60¢) might be just the brilliant combination described above. For lack of a dozen pages to discuss it, I will call it simply Prophetic Power: the binding energy that holds a novel of ideas together, provides the essential unity be-

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tween theme, plot, and background, situates the most fantastic or unlikely characters and locales in a subjective matrix of "reality."

This is, of course, Miss Russ' first novel, and as such, it is quite startlingly superior: I cannot think when I last enjoyed so much reading anything so unconvincing.

I mean, I didn't believe *anything:* not the character of the protagonist, nor (except in brief flashes) any other characters; not the situation in which they were placed, the world in which it occurred, or the final outcome. I did not, and do not, believe that a battle-scarred super-annuated (twenty-six, long past her prime for her time) adventuress from ancient Tyre is likely (let alone *necessarily*) the psychological, physical, and moral superior of people from a civilization four millennia later where "super-diets and hybridization from seventy colonized planets had turned all humanity . . . into Scandinavian giants"—and nothing in the improbable sequence of events described convinced me of it, even temporarily. (These include the use as an expendable Special Agent—untrained and unbriefed—of the only human being ever recovered from the past by an expensive and power-consuming time probe; a limited war being fought with elaborate ground rules for possession of a planet whose only value is as a resort area—where accredited tourist/neutrals cannot be lifted off-planet from a base manned by an interplanetary agent; complete vulnerability to the effects of drugs used as commonplace refreshers and tranquillizers on the part of those most habituated to their use, while the only character totally unaccustomed to them can fight off their effects—and *lots* more.)

The overtones in all this are an oddly-assorted and overall-agreeable admixture of Leiber and Laumer (Mouser and Retief) which combine well with the pure Russ components, but nowhere add up to the "straight science fiction" the book purports to be. And I suppose it is, actually, only its false-science-fiction front I am complaining about, because actually, while I was reading, I didn't *care.*

Joanna Russ *writes* so well, it doesn't really matter if she makes sense. When it all got too much for me, I didn't stop: I just switched over to a (highly necessary) willful "suspension of disbelief," and went on reading into the small hours of the night, for the sheer pleasure of the prose, and delight in the imagery, color, and content of one vivid scene after another.

She could have made it easier for me if she had set the thing up as the fantasy it is. Or she could, with remarkably little change, have written it as a modern novel, and made me *believe,* easily, that a scrawny primitive battleax from, say, Peru or Viet Nam, was basically tougher

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and earthily smarter than a tourist crew from New York. Maybe the next one— The fact is, *whatever* she does with the next one, I'll be there reading. The girl can *write*.

And who knows? Maybe she can learn the Prophet Business too.

—JUDITH MERRIL

Letters to the Book Editor

SCIENCE FICTION AND POETRY

About forty years ago, poetry went into the academies. It has been gradually emerging, but the general public is still suspicious of the modern poet, often with good reason. However, much good poetry is being written today, poetry that is not readily explained by psychoanalysis of the poet or diagrams of his verse forms. Much of the new poetry deals with science fiction and fantasy, and some of it is really excellent.

Consider this stanza from W. S. Merwin's poem, "Fog-Horn":

Surely that moan is not the thing
That men thought they were making, when they
Put it there, for their own necessities.
That throat does not call to anything human
But to something men had forgotten,
That stirs under fog. Who wounded that beast
Incurably, or from whose pasture
Was it lost, full grown . . .?

Does that send shivers up your spine? If not, try Stanley Kunitz. Here is the opening of "My Surgeons."

My surgeons are a savage band,
Surely their patient is ill-fated.
Their tricks are coarse: the small sweet hand
I seized was wax, or amputated.
With the humiliated swollen-footed
And the lost persecuted their traps are baited.

Does he remind you of Poe? He has horrors Poe never dreamed of, such as the thing that eats the heart.

The thing that eats the heart comes wild with years.
It died last night, or was it wounds before,
But somehow crawls around, inflamed with need,
Jingling its medals at the fang-scratched door.

There are many such poems by modern poets, but somehow they have not yet found their proper audience. Let me whet your appetite with one more quote, from a short poem by David Ignatow titled "News Report."

At two a.m. a thing, jumping out of a manhole,
the cover flying, raced down the street,
emitting wild shrieks of merriment and lust.
Women on their way from work, chorus girls
or actresses, were accosted with huge leers
and made to run. . . .

But I don't want to spoil the poem for you by telling you what happens. Read it yourself.

You can't find it? You haven't time? Then isn't it about time some publisher made things easier for us poetry and science fiction fans by publishing an anthology of science fiction poetry, an anthology that would include some of the old favorites by Edgar Allan Poe as well as some poems by the likes of Merwin, Kunitz, and Ignatow?

—Victor Contoski, Madison, Wisc.

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"I think we have just the thing for that upset tummy of yours, Mrs. Starbright . . ."

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This story deals in a short space with the contemporary versions of several timeless problems: the alienation of generations (don't trust anyone over thirty); when is progress evil (should we manipulate men's minds because we know how?). "I know the brain is an electric organ," said Littlejohn. "But how is that organ to be played?" By psychiatry? By drugs? By electronic toys under human control?

BUTTERFLY WAS 15

by Gilbert Thomas

MY DAUGHTER IS ONLY 15, BUT he made a pass at her right after dinner. I can't say I blame him. She is damned good-looking; they mature earlier these days, just like in the South Seas.

"Daddy, he made a pass at me," Syrie said after dinner, after cigars, and he'd gone. She laughed and held her nose. I didn't blame her. Dr. Delilkhan was an ugly bastard. And Syrie was still young enough to believe a man had to be good-looking to be desirable—eligible—desire was supposed to come later.

She'd danced a wild watusi for us before dinner, and what with the short skirt and round hole in the center of her dress, circling her navel, you really couldn't blame the old cock. That's kids these days. I'd kissed her goodnight, and she'd gone out, while I went into the study to collect my thoughts.

Other people's problems keep my mind off my own. Delilkhan had been more right than he knew when he'd said, "And you think you have problems . . ." Syrie's mother had had to be put away—one of those things. Jennifer wasn't raving, she'd just gone quietly mad over the years. At the home I was glad to see she could still

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come and go as she pleased, so long as it was only to the fence. She would go through my pockets and tell me I'd been untrue, as she smiled up at me and tried to whistle.

"But Daddy, he's always trying to make me," Syrie said before Delilkhan's next-to-last visit—with her wearing that summery papier-mache jewelry the kids were wearing these days, a paint job and crazy-leg stockings—her legs looking like curled smoke as she came frugging into the living room in a fishnet blouse over pasties.

"Syrie, you go put something on . . ."

"But Daddy, all the kids are doing it."

"I don't care what all the kids are doing, you get that goddamn net off and go put on a bra!"

"Yes, sir . . ."

Which was a surprise—I usually get more of an argument out of Syrie. I heard the door close—she had gone out.

"Lots of spirit, your daughter," said Delilkhan over Filipino cigars, best in the world, depend on it.

"She's only 15."

"Yes, delicious age; Cleopatra was only 13 when she married; June Havoc was dancing on Broadway at 14."

"Why don't you leave her alone?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, well, I'm too busy for that sort of thing, statutory rape and all that—although if they enforced that law there wouldn't be room left for the drunks—no, *Dear Abby* says if they're big enough, they're old enough—and I must say your daughter is delicious—but I'm a busy man."

"Are you English?"

"Studied in England, Brasenose, why?"

"When you get excited, you've still got the accent."

He smiled and touched my arm. "We've come to know each other very well, Littlejohn—sometimes I feel almost like a member of the family—and now I must tell you something . . ."

He sipped my cognac and let me have it.

"You're a fool, Dr. Littlejohn," he began quietly enough. "You're not stupid—but you'll never get anywhere," and he began to build. "Ethics—afraid to take chances! Morality, bloody middle-class morality! Strangling mankind since time began!" There was something about omelets and eggs, and he concluded: "The future will thank you for it . . ."

"You mean—make omelets, break eggs?"

"Exactly—get over your repressions, man, freedom! Freedom's the thing! Hell, your daughter knows more about freedom than you do . . ."

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"How do you know?"

"Never mind how I know—I've got eyes. I talk to people. I know what's happening!"

"Do you play the guitar?"

"All right, be funny—but let me show you what I'm doing now and maybe you'll laugh out of the other side of your face . . ." And he pulled a slender silver flask from his vest, opened it with a flick and dumped the contents into his palm. A speck of metal.

"What is it?"

"The Mind of the Future . . ."

"I'd hoped it would be larger."

"Very funny," but he was growing white . . . Thus be it ever, the enlightened man fighting the Philistines—it's uncomfortable to be taken for a Philistine.

Syrie bounced through the room as he slipped the speck back into its flask.

"Really?" I asked, softening, but not much. "What is it?"

"There's no mystery to this," he said, moistening his lips, and he leaned into me. "We've been inserting them into the brains of animals—and man, Littlejohn, *man.*"

"So that's it."

"Electrodes, Littlejohn, *electrodes*—carefully positioned in that part of the brain we wish to control . . ."

A man spends 12 years of his life learning a profession, and they come along with flecks and chemicals and try to wipe it all out overnight.

"We *manipulate* the brain, Littlejohn—memory, learning, hate, fear—it's more exciting than space!"

"I always told you psychiatry was interesting . . ."

That I'm a conservative practitioner, this I know—and I know the brain is an electric organ. But how is that organ to be played? I say by Jungian psychiatry.

"Play it with juice—radio controlled!"

"Evil, Doctor . . ."

"There is no evil—I am a scientist."

"And damn near kicked out of the club."

"But I wasn't—that's the point, Littlejohn—there's no use being hypocritical: I'm good."

I didn't want to hear any more. My mind's been poisoned enough by white bread, but these Messiahs always burn, and this is what he said as he strode the room:

"*Item*: monkeys—I've made them jump from a mile away—electronic toys under human control!"

". . . *human*?"

"*Item*: a pup's eyes—slip an electrode into the brain and work its pupils like a Leica—pinpoint one eyeball to f/64 while the other remains wide open to a welding torch—we tell it to feel no pain!"

"Talk about Frankenstein . . ."

"*Item*: a cat—piloerection—"

"What's piloerection?"

"Hair standing on end . . ."

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You can make animals do anything. We're talking to dolphins. The Moscow Circus has bears riding bicycles. I do pretty well with auto-suggestion myself.

"*Item*: 11-year old boy—shy, tongue-tied, 4 to 17 words every two minutes—goes ape when his brain is stimulated, a Jerry Lewis, Dino, loose as ashes, 44 words a minute: sharp. We juiced the kid seven separate times . . ."

"That's enough . . ."

Syrie bounced through the room as he stopped; then she sat down to face me.

"Females, Littlejohn—girls have been made to control their own pleasure centers—we give them a button to press—it feels good—press it again and they don't want to stop. They hold hands with their doctors and poor drabs that these were even hinted at marriage . . ."

"Get out of my house . . ."

"Well, hell, Littlejohn—look at it this way—baboons have been sexually aroused by radio command. One pair was provoked to copulate 81 times in 90 minutes, and you're not getting any younger . . ."

"*Get out of my house!*"

I had no right to speak to him like that; every man is entitled to his opinion—fight to the death for your right to say it, and all that—so I followed him out. I was almost to his car when I saw my daughter Syrie sitting inside, waiting to be driven away. She leaned over and kissed him as he put the car into gear.

Obviously I'm a loner in a new world, not of my own making. But if I was in an ivory tower, I would have to come down for the sake of my family. I had felt sorry for Delilkhan, working at County General while I spent the bulk of my time in a pleasant room listening to interesting people—but also lecturing, when asked. I now took advantage of my contacts to gain information. Without surprise I learned that Delilkhan had told me only half the truth—as is the way with pioneers. And when Syrie—when next seen—said: "I don't know why I love him . . ." I was sure my information was correct. Dr. Pol Vrasek, director of the new Para-Psychiatric Center on campus, had informed me that electrodes placed in the brain was a technique already obsolescent. That he would show me something better. And placing me in a soundproof room, he'd said: "Put everything out of your mind—don't think."

Now, it's difficult for me to still my brain. I couldn't stop thinking. And I thought the damndest thoughts. I wanted to go to MGM and become a movie star. I'd never thought that in my life. Besides, MGM is out of the movie business, concentrating on TV. I never wanted to go on TV.

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Peyton Place. And I was thinking that when Dr. Vrasek re-entered the chamber, smiling, and asking, "Well, which will you be—*The Thin Man,* Mickey Rooney or Grace Metalious?"

"My God," I said—"*you* did it!"

"Of course—subliminal hearing: the message conveyed on sub and ultrasonic frequencies keyed just above and below your hearing threshold." He showed me the little machine. "I talk to you and tell you what to think, what to feel—the brain grasps the message—and you think you think you're thinking it."

A simple radio device—a tape recorder could keep you going for hours—forever. With no one there.

Syrie was wearing flower-petal toe rings when she left the house that night, and not much else. Dress up to here. "But Daddy, it's the latest thing on Carnaby."

"What's Carnaby?"

"Carnaby Street, silly, where everything is!" And what was she *thinking*—was he telling her to meet him somewhere? "Nobody tells me anything; I think what I want—for the first time in my life I'm sure of myself, Daddy, really sure . . ." and she went out.

I went into her room, bullfight posters on the wall, Portofino, and opened her closet. Christ, it smelled good. I'd have to get married again. As I recalled the last thing Dr. Vrasek had told me: "Outside controlled laboratory conditions—to focus on the subject—it's best to use an interagent. A booster satellite—small as a mustard seed—tossed in the hair is good enough, if it's only for an afternoon . . ."

I searched through Syrie's clothes. I stood in her shoes, flatties and pumps, holding scarves and short skirts in the air till I looked like Jack Lemmon. Feeling the seams. No seed—no message. I tried putting everything out of my mind to receive any signal directed at her: nothing, nothing—then—*wait.* Something—what was it?—listen:

"Take your clothes off . . ."

The voice was familiar, the one you always hear in your inner thoughts—just as Vrasek demonstrated. But it could be an hallucination—until it said:

"Syrie, baby . . ."

I thrust her skirt away from me and ran from the room:

"Sweet kiss . . ."

I'd heard enough:

"Open your mouth . . ."

I couldn't stand any more . . .

I invited him to dinner the next night, but he said he couldn't make it, had to turn in early, but that he could make it the following night—in fact, he had something important to tell me.

Syrie was there, through dinner, and after, looking dreamy-eyed, bursting into wild watusis

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and frugging at odd moments. Delilkhan couldn't take his eyes off her. Over coffee and liqueurs, he began talking about marriage in a year or so, as the fruit of an unusual experiment he now wanted to tell me about—that I would have to understand. But it was too late. He began staring at the light globe I had left carefully uncovered. I locked Syrie in her room, got pad and pencil, and waited. First Delilkhan went down on all fours, a wide smile on his face; revolving his head, he began to drool. I made careful notes, and when he began to howl, I sat on the back of the sofa to stay out of the way. There was no need of oscillating lights, sweet music or meaningful conversation: I'd given him enough diethylamide tartrate of D-lysergic acid to flatten the entire graduating class of UCLA. He might survive; he might not. It was an experiment. No one had ever taken so much LSD. He tore his clothes off, he laughed, he chuckled, he screamed, and then the trip got bad . . . he went into the tunnel of darkness. He came out twitching. I turned out the lights and put on appropriate music: 12-tone. He went up the wall. I was sure of one thing—I was thinking for myself. He had convinced me—God is not dead.

He gets on well with Jennifer, and I visit them every Thursday.

But I never take Syrie.

(Who wants to see a man suffer?)

Fortunately she is under perfect control.

Have you missed F&SF at your newsdealer recently?

Readers in New York and in Boston who buy their copies on the newsstands may have missed some recent issues. We regret this. For a number of reasons we were obliged to change distributors both in New York (Manhattan) and in Boston. As a result, the number of newsdealers who receive copies of F&SF is somewhat limited: 350 dealers in Manhattan and 200 dealers in Boston.

We hope this situation will improve as the wholesalers broaden their coverage. Meanwhile, may we suggest a subscription, which will bring each issue to your home regularly and on time. It will also save you some money. Use the coupon on page 118.

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Here is the third and concluding part of Piers Anthony's new novel, in which the riddle of a post-holocaust society composed of nomads and "crazies" is answered, beginning with the strange "mountain of death."

SOS THE ROPE

by Piers Anthony

(CONCLUSION)

SYNOPSIS: It is the second century following the Blast that annihilated western civilization, and armed nomads wander between hostels maintained by the technologically advanced Crazies. SOS, defeated in the battle circle by SOL of all weapons, agrees to train the nucleus of an empire for him. Early in their relationship Sos saves Sol's life, but falls in love with Sol's wife Sola. Sos and Sola have an affair and Sola becomes pregnant. Sol, a mighty warrior but castrate, resolves to keep the child for himself.

Sos's constant companion is STUPID, a tiny mock-sparrow from the radioactive badlands. Sos is also friendly with the amiable SAV the Staff. TYL of two weapons is chief officer of the tribe, but Sos remains the real leader, since only he is literate.

The training is thorough, and Sol's new tribe expands rapidly. Only one man balks it: BOG the Club, who lays waste its best men and battles Sol himself to a draw.

Sos departs before his illegitimate child is born and visits his old Crazy mentor, who provides him with a new weapon: the Rope. Thus armed, he sets out in search of Sol, determined to win Sola honorably. On the way he meets and teams with Bog, and the two defeat the top teams of the Pit doubles tribe in order to demand information about Sol's whereabouts.

Finding Sol at last, Sos discovers that the child born is a girl, useless as a warrior—yet Sol values her highly. The two friends do not wish to fight, and Sol has no further need of Sola—but because the child Soli is too young to leave her mother and

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Sol will not give up his adopted daughter, the matter has to be settled in the circle.

The rope-weapon's one weakness is the staff—and Sol accidently selects the staff as his implement. Sos has lost again. There is no way out for him but to go to the mountain: a form of ritual suicide.

XIV

IT WAS MIDSUMMER BY THE time he stood at the foot of the mountain. This was a strange heap of lava and slag towering above the twisted landscape, sculpted in some manner by the Blast but free of radiation. Shrubs and stunted trees approached the base, but only weeds and lichen ascended the mountain itself.

Sos peered up but could not see the top. A few hundred yards ahead great projections of metallic material obscured the view, asymmetrical and ugly. Gliding birds of prey circled high in the haze overhead, watching him.

There was wind upon the mountain, not fierce, but howling dismally around the brutal serrations. The sky above it was overcast and yellowish.

This was surely the mountain of death. No one could mistake it.

He touched his fingers to his shoulder and lifted Stupid. The bird had never been handsome; his mottled brown feathers always seemed to have been recently ruffled, and the distribution of colors remained haphazard—but Sos had become accustomed to every avian mannerism in the time they had had their association. "This is about as far as you go, little friend," he said. "I go up, never to come down again—but it is not your turn. Those vultures aren't after *you*."

He flicked the bird into the air, but Stupid spread his wings, circled, and came to roost again upon his shoulder.

Sos shrugged. "I give you your freedom, but you do not take it. Stupid." It was meaningless, but he was touched. How could the bird know what was ahead?

For that matter, how could *anyone* know? How much of human loyalty and love was simply ignorance of destiny?

He still wore the rope, but no longer as a weapon. He caught a languishing sapling and stripped it as Sol had done, making himself a crude staff for balance during the climb. He adjusted his heavy pack and moved out.

The projections *were* metal—enormous sheets and beams melted at the edges and corners, securely embedded in the main mass, the crevices filled with pebbles and dirt. It was as though a thousand men had shoved it together and set fire to it all—assuming that metal would burn. Perhaps they had poured alcohol upon it? Of course

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not; this was the handiwork of the Blast.

Even at this terminal stage of his life, Sos retained his curiosity about the phenomenon of the Blast. What was its nature, and how had it wrought such diverse things as the invisibly dangerous badlands and the mountain of death? If it had been unleashed somehow by man himself, as the crazies claimed, why had the ancients chosen to do it?

It was the riddle of all things, unanswerable as ever. The modern world began with the Blast; what preceded it was largely conjecture. The crazies claimed that there had been a strange other society before it, a world of incredible machines and luxury and knowledge, little of which survived. But while he half believed them, and the venerable texts made convincing evidence, the practical side of him set it all aside as unproven. He had described past history to others as though it were fact, but it was as realistic to believe that the books themselves, along with the men and landscape, had been created in one moment from the void, by the Blast.

He was delaying the climb unnecessarily. If he meant to do it, now was the time. If fear turned him back, he should admit it, rather than pretending to philosophize. One way or the other: action.

He roped a beam and hauled himself up, staff jammed down between his back and the pack. There was probably an easier way to ascend, since the many men who had gone before him would not have had ropes or known how to use them, but he had not come to expire the easy way. Stupid, dislodged, flew up and perched on the beam, peeking down at him. The bird never criticized, never got in the way; he winged himself to safety when there was action in the circle or in the tent at night, but always came back. He waited only for the conquest of this particular hazard, before rejoining his companion. Was this the definition of true friendship?

Sos scrambled to the upper surface of the beam and dislodged the rope. Sure enough, Stupid swooped in, brushing the tip of a wing against his right ear. Always the right shoulder, never the left! But not for long—the outcropping was merely the first of many, vertical and horizontal and angled, large and small and indefinite, straight and looped and twisted. It would be a tedious, grueling climb.

As evening came, he unlimbered warmer clothing from the pack and ate the solid bread he had found stocked for the mountaineers at the nearest cabin. How considerate of the crazies, to make available the stuff of life for those bent on dying!

He had looked at everything in that hostel, knowing that he would not have another chance. . . .

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even the television. It was the same silent meaningless pantomime as ever: men and women garbed like exaggerated crazies, fighting and kissing in brazen openness but never using proper weapons or making proper love. It was possible, with concentration, to make out portions of some kind of story —but every time it seemed to be making sense the scene would change and different characters would appear holding up glasses of liquid that foamed or, putting slender cylinders in their mouths and burning them. No wonder no one watched it! He had once asked Jones about the television, but the principal had only smiled and said that the maintenance of that type of technology was not in his department. It was all broadcast from pre-Blast tapes, anyway, Jones explained.

Sos put such foolishness aside. There were practical problems to be considered. He had loaded the pack carefully, knowing that a man could starve anywhere if he ventured without adequate preparation. The mountain was a special demise, not to be demeaned by common hunger or thirst. He had already consumed the quart bottle of fortified water, knowing that there would be edible snow at the height to take its place. Whatever lurked, it was not malnutrition.

What *did* lurk? No one had been able to tell him, since it was a one-way journey, and the books were strangely reticent. The books all seemed to stop just *before* the Blast; only scattered manuals used by the crazies were dated after it. That could be a sign that the books *were* pre-Blast—or it could discredit them entirely, since not one of them related to the *real* world. They and the television were parts of the elaborate and mystifying myth-world framework whose existence he believed one day and denied the next. The mountain could be yet another aspect of it.

Well, since he couldn't turn his mind off, there was a very practical way to find out. He would mount the mountain and see for himself. Death, at least, could not be secondhand.

Stupid fluttered about, searching out flying insects, but there did not seem to be many. "Go back down, bird-brain," Sos advised him. "This is no place for you." It seemed that the bird obeyed, for he disappeared from sight, and Sos yielded himself to the turbulence of semiconsciousness: television and iron beams and Sola's somber face and nebulous uncertainties about the nature of the extinction he sought. But in the cold morning Stupid was back, as Sos had known he would be.

The second day of the climb was easier than the first, and he covered three times the distance. The tangled metal gave way to packed rubble clogged by weeds: huge sections of dissolving rubber in the

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shape of a torus, oblong sheets of metal a few inches long, sections of ancient boots, baked clay fragments, plastic cups and hundreds of bronze and silver coins. These were the artifacts of pre-Blast civilization, according to the books; he could not imagine what the monstrous rubber doughnuts were for, but the rest appeared to be implements similar to those stocked in the hostels. The coins were supposed to have been symbols of status; to possess many of them had been like victory in the circle.

If the books could be believed.

Late in the afternoon, it rained. Sos dug one of the cups out of the ground, knocked out the caked dirt, and held it up to trap the water. He was thirsty, and the snow was farther away than he had expected. Stupid sat hunched on his shoulder, hating the drenching; Sos finally propped up a flap of the pack to shield the little bird.

But in the evening there were more insects abroad, as though the soaking had forced them out, and that was good. He applied repellent against the mosquitoes while Stupid zoomed vigorously, making up for lean times.

Sos had kept his mind on his task, but now that the mountain had lost its novelty his thoughts returned to the most emotional episodes of his life. He remembered the first meeting with Sol, both of them comparatively new to the circle, still exploring the world and feeling their way cautiously in protocol and battle. Evidently Sol had tried all his weapons out in sport encounters, until sure of himself; then, with their evening's discussion, that first night, Sol had seen the possible mechanisms of advancement. Play had stopped for them both, that day and night, and already their feet had been treading out their destinies, leading to power for the one, and for the other—the mountain.

He remembered Sola, then an innocent girl, lovely and anxious to prove herself by the bracelet. She had proven herself—but not by the bracelet she wore. That, more than anything else, had led him here.

Strange, that the three should meet like that. Had it been just the two men, the empire might even now be uniting them. Had the girl appeared before or after, he might have taken her for a night and gone on, never missing her. But it had been a triple union, and the male empire had been sown with the female seed of destruction even as it sprouted. It was not the particular girl that mattered, but her presence at the inception. Why had she come *then!*

He closed his eyes and saw the staff, blindingly swift, blocking him, striking him, meeting him everywhere he turned, no instrument of defense but savage offense; the length of it across his body, the end of it flying at his face, fouling

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his rope, outmaneuvering him, beating down his offense and his defense. . . .

And now the mountain, the only honorable alternative. He had lost to the better man.

He slept, knowing that even victory would not have been the solution. He had been in the wrong—not totally, but wrong on balance.

On the third day the snows began. He wrapped the last of the protective clothing around him and kept moving. Stupid clung to him, seemingly not too uncomfortable. Sos scooped up handfuls of the white powder and crammed them into his mouth for water, though the stuff numbed his cheeks and tongue and melted grudgingly down into almost nothing. By nightfall he was ploughing through drifts several inches deep, and he had to step carefully to avoid treacherous pitfalls that did not show in the leveled surface.

There was no shelter. He lay on his side, facing away from the wind, comfortable enough in the protective wrappings. Stupid settled down beside his face, shivering, and suddenly he realized that the bird had no way to forage anymore. Not in the snow. There would be no living insects here.

He dug a handful of bread out of the pack and held a crumb to Stupid's beak, but there was no response. "You'll starve," he said with concern but did not know what to do about it. He saw the feathers shaking, and finally he took off his left glove, cupped the bird in his bare warm palm and held his gloved right hand to the back of the exposed one. He would have to make sure he didn't roll or move his hands while sleeping, or he would crush the fragile body.

He woke several times in the night as gusts of cold snow slapped his face and pried into his collar, but his left hand never moved. He felt the bird shivering from time to time and cupped it close to his chest, hoping for a suitable compromise between warmth and safety. He had too much strength and Stupid was too small; better to allow some shivering than to. . . .

Stupid seemed all right in the morning, but Sos knew this could not last. The bird was not adapted to snow; even his coloration was wrong. "Go back down," he urged. "Down. Where it is warm. Insects." He threw the tiny body into the air, downhill, but to no avail; Stupid spread his wings and struggled valiantly with the cold, harsh air, uphill, and would not leave.

Yet, Sos asked himself as he took the bird in hand again and continued climbing, was this misplaced loyalty any more foolish than Sol's determination to retain a daughter he had not sired? A *daughter?* Or Sos's own adherence to a code of honor already severally violated? Men were irrational creatures; why not birds too? If

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separation were so difficult, they would die together.

A storm came up that fourth day. Sos drove onward, his face numbed in the slashing wind. He had goggles, tinted to protect his eyes, and he put them on now, but his nose and mouth were still exposed. When he put his hand up, he discovered a beard of ice superimposed upon his natural one. He tried to knock it off, but knew it would form again.

Stupid flew up as he stumbled and waved his hands. Sos guided the bird to his shoulder, where at least there was some stability. Another slip like that and the bird would be smashed, if he continued to carry it in his hand.

The wind stabbed into his clothing. Earlier he had been sweating, finding the wrappings cumbersome; now the moisture seemed to be caking into ice against his body. That had been a mistake; he should have governed his dress and pace so that he never perspired. There was nowhere for the moisture to go, so of course it eventually froze. He had learned this lesson too late.

This, then, was the death of the mountain. Freezing in the blizzardy upper regions or falling into some concealed crevasse . . . he had been watching the lay of the land, but already he had slipped and fallen several times, and only luck had made his errors harmless. The cold crept in through his garments, draining his vitality, and the eventual result was clear. No person had ever returned from the mountain, if the stories were true, and no bodies had ever been discovered or recovered. No wonder!

Yet this was not the kind of mountain he had heard about elsewhere. After the metal jumble near the base—how many days ago?—there had been no extreme irregularities, no jagged edges, sheer cliffs or preposterous ice bridges. He had seen no alternate ranges or major passes when the sky was clear. The side of this mountain tilted up fairly steadily, fairly safely, like that of an inverted bowl. Only the cold presented a genuine hazard.

Surely there was no impediment to those who elected to descend again. Not all, or even most, but *some* must have given it up and returned to the foot, either choosing a less strenuous way to die or deciding to live after all. He could still turn about himself. . . .

He picked the quiet bird from his shoulder, disengaging the claws with difficulty. "How about it, Stupid? Have we had enough?"

There was no response. The little body was stiff.

He brought it close to his face, not wanting to believe it. He spread one wing gently with his fingers, but it was rigid. Stupid had died rather than desert his companion, and Sos had not even

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known the moment of his passing.

True friendship. . . .

He laid the feathered corpse upon the snow and covered it over, a lump in his throat. "I'm sorry, little friend," he said. "I guess a man takes more dying than a bird." Nothing utterable came to mind beyond that, inadequate as it was.

He faced up the mountain and tramped ahead.

The world was a bleak place now. He had taken the bird pretty much for granted, but the sudden, silent loss was staggering. Now there was nothing he could do but go through with it. He had killed a faithful friend, and there was a raw place in his breast that would not ease.

Yet it was not the first time his folly had damaged another. All Sol had asked was friendship—and rather than grant him that, Sos had forced him into the circle. What had been so damned urgent about his own definition of honor? Why had he resisted Sol's ultimate offer with such determination? Was it because he had used a limited concept of honor to promote his own selfish objectives ruthlessly, no matter who else was sacrificed? And, failing in these, bringing further pain by wiping out whatever else might have been salvaged?

He thought again of Stupid, so recently dead upon his shoulder, and had his answer.

The mountain steepened. The storm intensified. Let it come! he thought; it was what he had come for. He could no longer tell whether it was night or day. Ice rimmed his goggles, if they were still on. He wasn't sure and didn't care. Everywhere was whirling whiteness. He was panting, his lungs were burning, and he wasn't getting enough air. The steep snowscape before him went on and on; there was no end to it.

He did not realize that he had fallen until he choked on the snow. He tried to stand up, but his limbs did not respond properly. "Come *on!*" he heard Sola calling him, and he listened though he knew it for illusion. He did go on, but more securely: on hands and knees. Then he was crawling on his belly, numb everywhere, except for the heartache.

True friendship!

At last the pleasant lassitude obliterated even that.

XV

"Up, muscles. It's better if you walk around, get the system functioning again, and all that."

Sos recovered unwillingly. He tried to open his eyes, but the darkness remained.

"Uh-uh! Leave that bandage alone! Even if you aren't snowblind, you're frostbit. Here, take my hand." A firm man's hand thrust itself against his arm.

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"Did I die?" Sos asked, bracing against the proffered fist as he stood.

"Yes. In a manner of speaking. You will never be seen on the surface again."

"And—Stupid?"

"What?"

"My bird, Stupid. Did he come here too?"

The man paused. "Either there's a misunderstanding, or you are insolent as hell."

Sos constricted his fingers on the man's arm, bringing an exclamation of pain. He caught at the bandage on his head with his free hand and ripped it off. There was bright pain as packed gauze came from his eyeballs, but he could see again.

He was in a hostel room, standing before a standard bunk surrounded by unstandard equipment. He wore his pantaloons but nothing else. A thin man in an effeminate white smock winced with the continuing pressure of his grip. Sos released him, looking for the exit.

Not a hostel, for this room was square. The standard furnishings had given him the impression. He had never seen a cabin this shape, however.

"I must say, that's an unusual recovery!" the man remarked, rubbing his arm. He was of middle age with sparse hair and pale features: obviously long parted from sun and circle.

"Are you a crazy?"

"Most people in your situation are content to inquire 'Where am I?' or something mundane like that. You're certainly original."

"I did not come to the mountain to be mocked," Sos said, advancing on him.

The man touched a button in the wall. "We have a live one," he said.

"So I see," a feminine voice replied from nowhere. An intercom, Sos realized. So they *were* crazies. "Put him in the rec room. I'll handle it."

The man touched a second button. A door slid open beside him. "Straight to the end. All your questions will be answered."

Sos brushed by him, more anxious to find the way out than to question an uncooperative stranger. But the hall did not lead out; it continued interminably, closed doors on either side. This was certainly no hostel, nor was it a building like the school run by the crazies. It was too big.

He tried a door, finding it locked. He thought about breaking it down, but was afraid that would take too much time. He had a headache, his muscles were stiff and flaccid at once, his stomach queasy. He felt quite sick, physically, and just wanted to get out before any more annoying strangers came along.

The end door was open. He stepped into a very large room

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filled with angular structures: horizontal bars, vertical rods, enormous boxes seemingly formed of staffs tied together at right angles. He had no idea what it all signified, and was too dizzy and ill to care.

A light hand fell across his arm, making him jump. He grabbed for his rope and whirled to face the enemy.

The rope was gone, of course, and the one who touched him was a girl. Her head did not reach even to his shoulder. She wore a baggy coverall, and her hair was bound in a close-fitting headcap, making her look boyish. Her tiny feet were bare.

Sos relaxed, embarrassed, though his head still throbbed and the place still disturbed him by its confinement. He had never been this tense before, yet inadequate. If only he could get out into the open forest—

"Let me have this," the little girl said. Her feather-gentle fingers slid across his forearm and fastened upon the bracelet. In a moment she had it off.

He grabbed for it angrily, but she eluded him. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

She fitted the golden clasp over her own wrist and squeezed it snug. "Very nice. I always wanted one of these," she said pertly. She lifted a pixie eyebrow at him. "What's your name?"

"Sos the—Sos," he said, remembering his defeat in the circle and considering himself therefore weaponless. He reached for her again, but she danced nimbly away. "I did not give that to you!"

"Take it back, then," she said, holding out her wrist. Her arm was slender but aesthetically rounded, and he wondered just how young she was. Certainly not old enough to be playing such games with a grown man.

Once more he reached . . . and grasped air. "Girl, you anger me."

"If you are as slow to anger as you are to move, I have nothing to worry about, monster."

This time he leaped for her, slow neither to anger nor to motion—and missed her again.

"Come on, baby," she cooed, wriggling her upraised wrist so that the metal band glittered enticingly. "You don't like being mocked, you say, so don't let a woman get away with anything. Catch me."

He saw that she wanted him to chase her and knew that he should not oblige; but the pain in his head and body cut short his caution and substituted naked fury. He ran after her.

She skipped fleetly beside the wall, looking back at him and giggling. She was so small and light that agility was natural to her; her body could not have weighed more than a hundred pounds including the shapeless garment. As he

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gained on her, she dodged to the side and swung around a vertical bar, making him stumble.

"Lucky you aren't in the circle!" she trilled. "You can't even keep your feet!"

By the time he got on her trail once more, she was in among the poles, weaving around them with a facility obviously stemming from long experience.

Sos followed, grasping the uprights and swinging his body past them with increasing dexterity. Now that he was exerting himself he felt better, as though he were throwing off the lethargy of the freezing mountain. Again he gained—and again she surprised him.

She leaped into the air and caught the bottom rung of a ladder suspended from the high ceiling. She flipped athletically and hooked it with her feet, then ascended as though she had no weight at all. In moments she was far out of reach.

Sos took hold of the lowest rung, just within his range, and discovered that it was made of flexible plastic, as were the two vertical columns. He jerked experimentally. A ripple ran up the ropes, jarring the girl. Ropes? He smiled and shook harder, forcing her to cling tightly in order not to be shaken off. Then, certain he had her trapped, he gradually hauled down until his entire weight was suspended.

It would hold him. He hoisted himself to the rung, unused to this type of exercise but able to adapt. He could handle a rope.

She peeked down, alarmed, but he climbed steadily, watching her. In a few seconds he knew he would be able to grab her foot and haul her down with him.

She threaded her legs through the top of the ladder and leaned out upside down, twisting her body and touching it with her freed hands. The coverall came away from her shoulders and to her hips—up or down, depending upon perspective—then she caught one arm in the ladder and stripped herself the rest of the way. She wore a slight, snug two-piece suit underneath which decorated little more than her bosom and buttocks. Sos revised his estimate of her age sharply upward; she was as well-rounded a woman as he had seen.

She contemplated him with that elfin expression, spread out the coveralls, and dropped them neatly upon his raised face.

He cursed and pawed it away, almost losing his grip on the ladder. She was shaking it now, perhaps in the belief she could dislodge him while he was blinded, and he felt her strike his clutching hand.

By the time he had secured his position and cast off the clinging, faintly scented cloth, she was standing on the floor below him,

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giggling merrily. She had gone right by him! "Don't you want your bracelet, clumsy?" she teased.

Sos handed himself down and dropped to the floor, but she was gone again. This time she mounted the box-like structure, wriggling over and under the bars as though she were a flying snake. He ran to the base, but she was amidst it all, and he could not get at her from any direction without climbing into it himself. He knew by this time that he could never catch her that way; she was a gymnast whose size and weight made her entirely at home here.

"All right," he said, disgruntled but no longer angry. He took the time to admire her lithe and healthy body. Who would have suspected such rondure in so brief a package? "Keep it."

A moment and several gyrations later she stood beside him. "Give up?"

He snapped his fingers over her upper arm, using the trick of his rope-throw to make the motion too quick to elude. "No."

She did not even wince at the cruel pressure. She sliced her free hand sidewise into his stomach, just below the rib cage and angling up, fingers flat and stiff.

He was astonished at the force of the blow and was momentarily paralyzed. Still, he maintained his grip and tightened it until her firm young flesh was crushed against the bone.

Even so, she did not shrink or exclaim. She struck him again with that peculiar flat of the hand, this time across the throat. Incredible agony blossomed there. His stomach drove its content up into his mouth, and he could not even catch his breath or cry out. He let go, gagging and choking.

When he became aware of his surroundings again he was sitting on the floor, and she was kneeling astride his legs and resting her hands upon his shoulders. "I'm sorry I did that, Sos. But you are very strong."

He stared dully at her, realizing that she was somewhat more talented than he had guessed. She was a woman, but her blows had been sure.

"I really *would* like to keep your bracelet, Sos. I know what it means."

He thought about the way Sol had given his bracelet to Sola. The initial carelessness of the act had not signified any corresponding laxity in the relationship, though its terms were strange. Was he now to present his own bracelet even more capriciously, simply because a woman asked for it? He tried to speak, but his larynx, still constricted from the knock, did not permit it.

She held out her wrist to him and did not retreat. He reached up slowly and circled it with his fingers. He remembered that he had fought for Sola and lost, while this

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woman had, in more than a manner of speaking, challenged him for the bracelet and won.

Perhaps it *had* to be taken from him. Had he been ready to give it away, he should have given it to blonde Miss Smith, knowing that she wanted it. Sola, too, had forced her love upon him and made him respond. He did not like what this seemed to indicate about his nature, but it was better to accept it than to try to deny it.

He squeezed the bracelet gently and dropped his hand.

"Thank you, Sos," she murmured, and leaned over to kiss him.

XVI

When he woke again he suspected that it had been a fantasy, like the oddities visible on the silent television, except that his bracelet was gone and his left wrist was pale where it had rested. This time he was alone, in another squared-off cabin, and feeling fit. Somehow he had been taken from the mountain and revived and left here, while his little friend Stupid had died. He could not guess the reason.

He got up and dressed, finding his clothing beside the bunk, clean and whole. If this were death, he thought, it was not unlike life. But that was foolishness; this was *not* death.

No food had been stocked, and there were no weapons upon the rack. As a matter of fact, the rack itself was absent. Sos opened the door, hoping to see familiar forest or landscape or even the base of the mountain—and found only a blank wall similar to the one he had traveled down in the vision. No vision after all, but reality.

"I'll be right with you, Sos." It was the voice of the little girl—the tiny woman who had teased him and outmaneuvered him and finally struck him down. His throat still ached, now that he thought of it, though not obtrusively. He looked at his bare wrist again.

Well, she had claimed to know what the bracelet meant.

She trotted down the hall, as small as ever, wearing a more shapely smock and smiling. Her hair, now visible, was brown and curly, and it contributed considerably to her femininity. The bracelet on her arm glittered; evidently she had polished it to make the gold return to life. He saw that it reached all the way around her wrist and overlapped slightly, while the mark it had left on his own wrist left a good quarter of the circle open. Had this tiny creature actually prevailed over him?

"Feeling better, Sos?" she inquired solicitously. "I know we gave you a rough time yesterday, but the doc says a period of exercise is best to saturate the system. So I saw that you got it."

He looked uncomprehendingly at her.

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"Oh, that's right—you don't understand about our world yet." She smiled engagingly and took his arm. "You see, you were almost frozen in the snow, and we had to bring you around before permanent damage was done. Sometimes a full recovery takes weeks, but you were so healthy we gave you the energizer immediately. It's some kind of drug—I don't know much about these things—it scours out the system somehow and removes the damaged tissue. But it has to reach everywhere, and the fingers and toes and things—well, I don't really understand it. But some good, strenuous calisthenics circulate it nicely. Then you sleep, and the next thing you know, you're better."

"I don't remember—"

"I put you to sleep, Sos. After I kissed you. It's just a matter of touching the right pressure points. I can show you, if—"

He declined hastily. She must have gotten him to the cabin room, too—or more likely had a man haul him there. Had she also undressed him and cleaned his clothing, as Sola had done so long ago? The similarities were disturbing.

"It's all right, Sos. I have your bracelet, remember? I didn't stay with you last night because I knew you'd be out for the duration, but I'll be with you from now on." She hesitated. "Unless you changed your mind?"

She was so little, more like a doll than a woman. Her concern was quite touching, but it was hard to know what to say. She was hardly half his weight. What could she know of the way of men and women?

"Oh, is that so!" she exclaimed, flashing, though he had not spoken. "Well, let's go back to your room right now, and I'll show you I don't just climb ladders!"

He smiled at her vehemence. "No, keep it. I guess you know what you're doing." And he guessed he liked being chased, too.

She had guided him through right-angled corridors illuminated by overhead tubes of incandescence and on to another large room. There seemed to be no end to this odd enclosed world. He had yet to see honest daylight since coming here. "This is our cafeteria. We're just in time for first mess."

There was a long counter with plates of food set upon it—thin slices of bacon, steaming oatmeal, poached eggs, sausage, toasted bread and other items he did not recognize. Farther down he saw cups of fruit juice, milk and hot drinks, as well as assorted jellies and spreads. It was as though someone had emptied the entire larder of a hostel and spread it out for a single feast. There was more than anyone could eat.

"Silly. You just take anything you want and put it on your tray," she said. "Here." She lifted a plastic tray from a stack at the end and

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handed it to him. She took one herself and preceded him down the aisle, selecting plates as she moved. He followed, taking one of each.

He ran out of tray space long before the end of the counter. "Here," she said, unconcerned. "Put some on mine."

The terminus opened into an extended dining area, square tables draped with overlapping white cloths. People were seated at several, finishing their meals. Both men and women wore coveralls and smocks similar to what he had seen already, making him feel out of place though he was normally dressed. Sosa led him to a vacant table and set the array of food and beverage upon it.

"I could introduce you to everyone, but we like to keep meals more or less private. If you want company, you leave the other chairs open; if you want to be left alone, tilt them up, like this." She leaned the two unused chairs forward against the sides of the table. "No one will bother us."

She viewed his array. "One thing, Sos—we don't waste anything. You eat everything you take."

He nodded. He was ravenous.

"We call this the underworld," she said as he ate, "but we don't consider ourselves criminals." She paused, but he didn't understand the allusion. "Anyway, we're all dead here. I mean, we all would have been dead if we hadn't—well, the same way you came climbing the mountain. I came last year. Just about every week there's someone—someone who makes it. Who doesn't turn back. So our population stays pretty steady."

Sos looked up over a mouthful. "Some turn back?"

"*Most* do. They get tired, or they change their minds, or something, and they go down again."

"But no one ever returns from the mountain!"

"That's right," she said uncomfortably.

He didn't press the matter, though he filed it away for future investigation.

"So we're really dead, because none of us will ever be seen in the world again. But we aren't idle. We work very hard. As soon as we're finished eating, I'll show you."

She did. She took him on a tour of the kitchen, where sweaty cooks worked full time preparing the plates of food, and helpers ran the soiled dishes and trays through a puffing cleaning machine. She showed him the offices where accounts were kept. He did not grasp the purpose of such figuring, except that it was essential in some way to keep mining, manufacturing and exporting in balance. This made sense; he remembered the computations he had had to perform when training Sol's warriors, and this underworld was a far more complex community.

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She took him to the observation deck, where men watched television screens and listened to odd sounds. The pictures were not those of the ordinary sets in the cabins, however, and this attracted his immediate interest.

"This is Sos," she said to the man in charge. "He arrived forty-eight hours ago. I—took him in charge."

"Sure—Sosa," the man replied, glancing at the bracelet. He shook Sos's hand. "I'm Tom. Glad to know you. Matter of fact, I recognize you. I brought you in. You certainly gave it a try!"

"Brought me in?" There was something strange and not altogether likeable about this man with the unusual name, despite his easy courtesy.

"I'll show you." Tom walked over to one of the screens that was blank. "This is a closed-circuit teevee covering the east slope of Helicon, down below the snowline." He turned it on, and Sos recognized the jumbled terrain he had navigated with the help of his rope. He had never seen a real picture on the television before—that is, one that applied to the present world, he corrected himself, and it fascinated him.

"Helicon—the mountain?" he asked, straining to remember where he had read of something by that name. "The home of . . . the muses?"

Tom faced him, and again there was a strangeness in his pale eyes. "Now how would you know that? Yes—since we remember the things of the old world here, we named it after—" He caught a signal from one of the others and turned quickly to the set. "There's one coming down now. Here, I'll switch to him."

That reminded Sos. "The ones that come down—where do they go?" He saw that Sosa had withdrawn from their conversation, and was now showing off her bracelet to the other workers.

"I'm afraid you're about to find out, though you may not like it much," Tom said, watching him with a peculiar eagerness. Sos was careful not to react; these people obviously did not contest in the circle, but had their methods of trial. He was about to be subjected to something unpleasant.

Tom found his picture and brought the individual into focus. It was a middle-aged staffer, somewhat flabby. "He probably lost his woman to a younger warrior, and decided to make the big play," Tom remarked without sympathy. "A lot are like that. There's something about a broken romance that sends a man to the mountain." Sos's stomach tightened, but the man wasn't looking at him. "This one ascended to the snowline, then turned about when his feet got cold. Unless he changes his mind again pretty soon—"

"They do that?"

"Oh, yes. Some waver half a

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dozen times. The thing is, the mountain is real. Death looks honorable from a distance, but the height and snow make it a matter of determination. Unless a man is really serious about dying, that climb will make him reconsider. He wonders whether things back home are quite so bad as he thought, whether he couldn't return and try again. If he's weak, he vacillates, and of course we don't want the quitters. It's natural selection, really, not that that would mean anything to you."

Sos refused to be drawn out by the condescending tone and assumptions of ignorance. It occurred to him that his general knowledge could be a hidden asset, in case things got ugly here.

"A man who carries his convictions all the way to the end is a man worth saving," Tom continued as the picture, evidently controlled by the motions of his fingers on the knobs, followed the staffer unerringly. "We want to be sure that he really has renounced life, and won't try to run back at the first opportunity. The ordeal of the mountain makes it clear. You were a good example—you charged right on up and never hesitated at all. You and that bird—too bad we couldn't save it, but it wouldn't have been happy here. We saw you try to scare it away, and then it froze. I thought you were going to turn back then, but you didn't. Just as well; I liked your looks."

So all the agonies of his private demise had been observed by this cynical voyeur! Sos maintained the slightly stupid expression he had adopted since becoming suspicious, and watched the staffer pick his way along the upper margin of the projecting metal beams. There would be some later occasion, perhaps, to repay this mockery. "How did you—fetch me?"

"Put on a snowsuit and dragged you into the nearest hatch. Took three of us to haul the harness. You're a bull of a man, you know. After that—well, I guess you're already familiar with the revival procedure. We had to wait until you were all the way under; sometimes people make a last minute effort and start down again. We don't bring them in if they're facing the wrong way, even if they freeze to death. It's the intent that counts. You know, you almost made it to the top. That's quite something, for an inexperienced climber."

"How did you know I wouldn't kill myself when I woke up?"

"Well, we can never be sure. But generally speaking, a person doesn't choose the mountain if he's the suicidal type. That sounds funny, I know, but it's the case. Anyone can kill himself, but only the mountain offers complete and official oblivion. When you ascend Helicon, you never come back. There is no news and no body. It's as though you have entered anoth-

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er world—perhaps a better one. You're not giving up, you're making an honorable departure. At least, that's the way I see it. The coward kills himself; the brave or devout man takes the mountain."

Much of this made sense to Sos, but he didn't care to admit it yet. "But you said some turn back."

"*Most* turn back. They're the ones who are doing it for bravado, or as a play for pity, or just plain foolishness. We don't need them."

"What about that staffer out there now? If you don't take him in, where will he go?"

Tom frowned. "Yes. I'm afraid he really means to give up." He raised his voice. "Bill, you agree?"

" 'Fraid so," the man addressed called back. "Better finish it; there's another at the base. No sense having him see it."

"This is not a pleasant business," Tom said, licking his lips with an anticipation that seemed to be, if not pleasure, a reasonable facsimile. "But you can't maintain a legend on nothing. So—" He activated another panel, and wavy cross hairs appeared on the screen. As he adjusted the dials the cross moved to center on the body of the staffer. He pulled a red handle.

A column of fire shot out from somewhere offscreen and engulfed the man. Sos jumped, but realized that he could do nothing. For a full minute the terrible blaze seared on the screen; then Tom lifted the handle and it stopped.

A blackened mount of material was all that remained.

"Flamethrower," Tom explained pleasantly.

Sos had seen death before, but this appalled him. The killing had been contrary to all his notions of honor; no warning, no circle, no sorrow. "You mean—if I had—?"

Tom faced him, the light from the screen reflecting from the whites of his eyes in miniature skull-shapes. This was the question he had been waiting for. "Yes."

Sosa was tugging at his arm. "That's enough," she said. "Come on, Sos. We had to show you. It isn't all bad."

"What if I decide to leave this place?" he demanded, sickened by such calculated murder.

She pulled him on. "Don't talk like that. Please."

So that was the way it stood, he thought. They had not been joking when they named this the land of the dead. Some were dead figuratively, and some dead inside. But what had he expected when he ventured upon the mountain?

"Where are the women?" he asked as they walked the long passages.

"There aren't many. The mountain is not a woman's way. The few we have are—shared."

"Then why did you take my bracelet?"

She increased her pace. "I'll tell you, Sos, really I will—but not right now, all right?"

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They entered a monstrous workshop. Sos had been impressed by the crazies' "shop," but this dwarfed it as the underworld complex dwarfed an isolated hostel. Men were laboring with machines in long lines, stamping and shaping metal objects. "Why," he exclaimed, "those are weapons!"

"Well, *someone* has to make them, I suppose. Where did you think they came from?"

"The crazies always—"

"The truth is we mine some metals and salvage some, and turn out the implements. The crazies distribute them and send us much of our food in return. I thought you understood about that when I showed you the accounting section. We also exchange information. They're what you call the service part of the economy, and we're the manufacturing part. The nomads are the consumers. It's all very nicely balanced, you see."

"But *why?*" It was the same question he had asked at the school.

"That's something each person has to work out for himself."

And the same answer. "You sound like Jones."

"Jones?"

"My crazy instructor. He taught me how to read."

She halted, surprised. "Sos! You can *read?*"

"I was always curious about things." He hadn't meant to reveal his literacy. Still, he could hardly have concealed it indefinitely.

"Would you show me how? We have so many books here—"

"It isn't that simple. It takes years to learn."

"We have years, Sos. Come, I want to start right away." She fairly dragged him in a new direction, despite the disparity in their sizes. She had delightful energy.

It was easy to recognize the library. In many respects the underworld resembled the crazies' buildings. "Jim, this is Sos. He can read!"

The spectacled man jumped up, smiling. "Marvelous!" He looked Sos up and down, then, a trifle dubiously. "You look more like a warrior than a scholar. No offense."

"Can't a warrior read?"

Jim fetched a book. "A formality, Sos—but would you read from this? Just a sample passage, please."

Sos took the volume and opened it at random. "BRUTUS: Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius, To cut the head off and then to hack the limbs, Like wrath in death and envy afterwards; For Anthony is but a limb of Caesar; Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius. We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar; And in the spirit of men there is no blood; O! that we then—"

"Enough! Enough!" Jim cried. "You can read, you can read, you certainly can. Have you been assigned yet? We must have you in the library! There is so much to—"

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"You can give classes in reading," Sosa added excitedly. "We all want to learn, but so few know how—".

"I'll call Bob immediately. What a discovery!" The librarian fumbled for the intercom on his desk.

"Let's get out of here," Sos said, embarrassed by the commotion. He had always considered reading a private pursuit, except in the school, and found this eagerness upsetting.

It was a long day in the perpetual artificiality of the underworld, and he was glad to retire at the end of it. He was hardly certain he wanted to spend the rest of his life under the mountain, extraordinary as this world might be.

"But it really isn't a bad life, Sos," she said. "You get used to it—and the things we do are really important. We're the manufacturers for the continent; we make all the weapons, all the basic furnishings for the hostels, the prefabricated wall and floor, the appliances and electronic equipment—"

"Why did you take my bracelet?"

The question brought her up short. "Well, as I said, there aren't many women here. They have it scheduled so that each man has a —a night with someone each week. It isn't quite like a full-time relationship, but on the other hand there is variety. It works out pretty well."

The game of traveling bracelets. Yes, he could imagine how certain people would enjoy that, though he had noticed that most men did not use the golden signals here. "Why am I excluded?"

"Well you *can*, if you want. I thought—"

"I'm not objecting, girl. I just want to know *why*. Why do I rate a full-time partner when there aren't enough to go around?"

Her lip trembled. "Do—do you want it back?" She touched the bracelet.

He grabbed her, unresisting, and pressed her down upon the bunk. She met his kiss eagerly. "No, I *don't* want it back. I—oh, get that smock off, then!" What use to demand reason of a woman?

She divested herself of her clothing, all of it, with alacrity. Then, womanlike, she seemed to change her mind. "Sos—"

He had expected something like this. "Go ahead."

"I'm barren."

He watched her silently.

"I tried—many bracelets. Finally I had the crazies check me. I can never have a baby of my own, Sos. That's why I came to the mountain . . . but babies are even more important here. So—"

"So you went after the first man they hauled off the mountain."

"Oh, no, Sos. I took my turn on the list. But when there isn't any love *or* any chance for—well, some complained I was unresponsive, and there really didn't seem to be much point in it. So Bob put me on

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the revival crew, where I could meet new people. The one who is on duty when someone is brought in is, well, responsible. To explain everything and make him feel at home and get him suitably situated. You know. You're the nineteenth person I've handled—seventeen men and two women. Some of them were old, or bitter. You're the first I really—that sounds even worse, doesn't it!"

Young, strong, pliable: the answer to a lonely woman's dreams, he thought. Yet why not? He had no inclination to embrace assorted women in weekly servicings. Better to stick to one, one who might understand if his heart were elsewhere.

"Suppose I happen to want a child of my own?"

"Then you—take back your bracelet."

He studied her, sitting beside him, halfway hiding behind the balled smock as though afraid to expose herself while the relationship was in doubt. She was very small and very woman-shaped. He thought about what it meant to be denied a child, and began to understand as he had not understood before what had driven Sol.

"I came to the mountain because I could not have the woman I loved," he said. "I know all that is gone, now—but my heart doesn't. I can offer you only—friendship."

"Then give me that," she said, dropping the smock.

He took her into the bed with him holding her as carefully as he had held Stupid, afraid of crushing her. He held her passively at first, thinking that that would be the extent of it. He was wrong.

But it was Sola whom his mind embraced.

XVII

Bob was a tall, aggressive man, the manifest leader of the mountain group. "I understand you can read," he said at once. "How come?"

Sos explained about his schooling.

"Too bad."

Sos waited for him to make his point.

"Too bad it wasn't the next one. We could have used your talent here."

Sos still waited. This was like taking the circle against an unknown weapon. Bob did not have the peculiar aura of the death-dealing Tom, but he was named as strangely and struck Sos as thoroughly ruthless. He wondered how common this stamp was among those who had renounced life. It probably was typical; he had seen for himself the manner in which the personality of the leader transmitted itself to the group. Sos had shaped Sol's empire with tight organization and a touch of humor, letting the men enjoy their competition for points as they im-

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proved their skills. When he left, Vit had ruled, and the discipline remained without the humor. The camps had become grim places. Strange that he only saw this now!

"We have a special and rather remarkable assignment for you," Bob was saying. "A unique endeavor."

Seeing that Sos was not going to commit himself, Bob got down to specifics. "We are not entirely ignorant of affairs on the surface; can't afford to be. Our information is largely second-hand, of course—our teevee perceptors don't extend far beyond the Helicon environs—but we have a much better overall view than you primitives have. There's an empire building up there. We have to break it up in a hurry."

Evidently that excellent overall view did not reveal Sos's own place in the scheme. He suspected more strongly now that it would be best if it never were known. The flamethrower undoubtedly pointed in the direction of the organizer of such an empire, while an ignorant, if literate, primitive was safe. "How do you know?"

"You have not heard of it?" The contempt was veiled and perhaps unconscious; it had not occurred to Bob that a newcomer could know more than he. The question had lulled any suspicions he might have had, and strengthened his preconceptions. "It's run by one Sol, and it's been expanding enormously this past year. Several of our recent arrivals have had news of it, and there's even been word from the South American unit. Very wide notoriety."

"South America?" Sos had read about this, the continent of pre-Blast years, along with Africa and Asia, but had no evidence it still existed.

"Did you think we were the only such outfit in the world? There's one Helicon or more on every continent. We have lines connecting us to all of them, and once in a while we exchange personnel, though there is a language barrier. South America is more advanced than we are; they weren't hit so hard in the war. We have a Spanish-speaking operator, and quite a few of theirs speak English, so there's no trouble there. But that's a long way away; when *they* get wind of an empire here, it's time to do something about it."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? What would happen to the status quo if the primitives started really organizing? Producing their own food and weapons, say? There'd be no control over them at all!"

Sos decided that further questions along this line would be dangerous. "Why me?"

"Because you're the biggest, toughest savage to descend upon us in a long time. You bounced back from your exposure on the mountain in record time. If anyone can

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take it, you can. We need a strong body now, and you're it."

It occurred to Sos that it had been a long time since this man had practiced diplomacy, if ever. " 'It' for *what?*"

" 'It' to return to life. To take over that empire."

If Bob had intended to shock him, he had succeeded. To return to life! To go back . . . "I'm not your man. I have sworn never to bear a weapon again." That was not precisely true, but if they expected him to face Sol again, it certainly applied. He had agreed never to bring a weapon against Sol again—and regardless of other circumstances, he meant to abide by the terms of their last encounter. It was a matter of honor, in life or death.

"You take such an oath seriously?" But Bob's sneer faded as he looked at Sos. "What if we train you to fight without weapons?"

"Without a weapon—in the *circle?*"

"With your bare hands. The way your little girl does. That doesn't violate any of your precious vows, does it? Why are you so reluctant? Don't you realize what this means to you? You will have an empire!"

Sos was infuriated by the tone and implications, but realized that he could not protest further without betraying himself. This was big; the moment Bob caught on—

"What if I refuse? I came to the mountain to die."

"I think you know that there is no refusal here. But if personal pressure or pain doesn't faze you, as I hope it doesn't, there may be things that will. This won't mean much to you right now, but if you think about it for a while, you'll come around, I suspect." And Bob told him some things that vindicated Sos's original impression of him utterly.

Not for the reason the underground master thought—but Sos was committed.

"To *life?*" Sosa demanded incredulously, when he told her later. "But no one ever goes back!"

"I will be the first—but I will do it anonymously."

"But if you want to return, why did you come to the mountain? I mean—"

"I don't want to return. I have to."

"But—" She was at a loss for words for a moment. "Did Bob threaten you? You shouldn't let him—"

"It was not a chance I could afford to take."

She looked at him, concerned. "Was it to—to harm *her?* The one you—"

"Something like that."

"And if you go, you'll get her back."

After his experience in the observation deck, Sos was aware that anything he said or did might be observed in this region. He could not tell Sosa anything more than

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Bob thought he knew. "There is an empire forming out there. I have to go and eliminate its leader. But it won't be for a year or more, Sosa. It will take me that long to get ready. I have a lot to learn first."

Bob thought he had been swayed, among other things, by the dream of owning an empire. Bob must never know where his real loyalty lay. If someone were sent to meet Sol, it was best that it be a friend. . . .

"May I keep your bracelet—that year?"

"Keep it forever, Sosa. You will be training me."

She contemplated him sadly. "Then it wasn't really an accident, our meeting. Bob knew what you would be doing before we brought you in. He set it up."

"Yes." Again, it was close enough.

"Damn him!" she cried. "That was cruel!"

"It was necessary, according to his reasoning. He took the most practical way to do what had to be done. You and I merely happen to be the handiest tools. I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry!" she muttered. Then she smiled, making the best of it. "At least we know where we stand."

She trained him. She taught him the blows and the holds she knew, laboriously learned in childhood from a tribe that taught its women self-defense—and cast out the barren ones. Men, of course, disdained the weaponless techniques—but they also disdained to accept any woman who was an easy mark, and so the secret knowledge passed from mother to daughter: how to destroy a man.

Sos did not know what inducement Bob had used to make Sosa reveal these tactics to a man, and did not care to inqure.

She showed him how to strike with his hands with such power as to sunder wooden beams, and how to smash them with his bare feet, and his elbow, and his head. She made him understand the vulnerable points of the human body, the places where a single blow could stun or maim or kill. She had him run at her as though in a rage, and she brought him down again and again, feet and arms tangled uselessly. She let him try to choke her, and she broke that hold in half a dozen painful and embarrassing ways, though there was more strength in his two thumbs than in her two hands. She showed him the pressure points that were open to pain, the nerve centers where pressure induced paralysis or unconsciousness. She demonstrated submission holds that she could place on him with a single slender arm, that held him in such agony he could neither break nor fight, and used the natural weapons of the body, so basic they were almost forgotten by men: the teeth, the nails, the extended fingers, the bone of the skull, even the voice.

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And when he had mastered these things and learned to avoid and block the blows and break or nullify the holds and counter the devious strategies of weaponless combat, she showed him how to fight when portions of his body were incapacitated: one arm, two arms, the legs, the eyes. He stalked her blindfolded, with feet tied together, with weights tied to his limbs, with medicine to make him dizzy. He climbed the hanging ladder with arms bound in a straightjacket; he swung through the elevated bars with one arm shackled to one foot. He stood still while she delivered the blows that had brought him down during their first encounter, only twisting almost imperceptibly to take them harmlessly.

Then he set it all aside. He went to the operating room and exposed himself to the anesthetics and the scalpels. The surgeon placed flexible plastic panels under the skin of his belly and lower back, tough enough to halt the driven blade of knife or sword. He placed a collar upon Sos's neck that locked with a key, and braced the long bones of arms and legs with metallic rods, and embedded steel mesh in the crotch. He mutilated the face, rebuilding the nose with stronger stuff and filling the cheeks with nylon weave. He ground and capped the teeth. He peeled back the forehead and resodded with shaped metal.

Sundry other things occurred in successive operations before they turned him loose to start again. No part of him was recognizable as the man once known as Sos; instead he walked slowly, as a juggernaut rolls, fighting against the pain of an ugly rebirth.

He resumed training. He worked on the devices in the rec room, now more familiar to him than his new body. He climbed the ladder, swung on the bars, lifted the weights. He walked up and down the hallways, balancing his suddenly heavier torso and increasing his pace gradually until he was able to run without agony. He hardened his healing hands and feet by smashing the boards; in time he developed monstrously thick calluses. He stood still, this time not moving at all, while Sosa struck his stomach, neck and head with all her strength—with a staff—and he laughed.

Then with a steel-trap motion he caught the weapon from her inexpert grasp and bent it into an S shape by a single exertion of his two trunk-like wrists. He pinioned her own wrists, both together, with the fingers and thumb of one hand and lifted her gently off the floor, smiling.

Sosa jackknifed and drove both heels against his exposed chin. "Ouch!" she screamed. "That's like landing on a chunk of stone!"

He chuckled and draped her unceremoniously across his right

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shoulder while hefting his weight and hers upon the bottom rung of the ladder with that same right arm. She writhed and jammed stiffened fingers into his left shoulder just inside the collarbone. "You damned gorilla," she complained. "You've got calluses over your pressure points!"

"Nylon calluses," he said matter-of-factly. "I could break a gorrilla in two." His voice was harsh; the collar constricting his throat destroyed any dulcet utterances he attempted.

"You're still a great ugly beast!" she said, clamping her teeth hard upon the lobe of his ear and chewing.

"Ugly as hell," he agreed, turning his head so that she was compelled to release her bite or have her neck stretched painfully.

"Awful taste," she whispered as she let go. "I love you."

He reversed rotation, and she jammed her lips against his face and kissed him furiously. "Take me back to our room, Sos," she said. "I want to feel needed."

He obliged, but the aftermath was not entirely harmonious. "You're still thinking of *her*," she accused him. "Even when we're—"

"That's all over," he said, but the words lacked conviction.

"It's *not* over! It hasn't even begun yet. You still love her—and you're going back!"

"It's an assignment. You know that."

"*She* isn't the assignment. It's almost time for you to go, and I'll never see you again, and you can't even tell me you love me."

"I do love you."

"But not as much as you love her."

"Sosa, she is hardly fit to be compared to you. You're a warm, wonderful girl, and I would love you much more, in time. I'm going back, but I want you to keep my bracelet. How else can I convince you?"

She wrapped herself blissfully about him. "I know it, Sos. I'm a demented jealous bitch. It's just that I'm losing you forever, and I can't stand it. The rest of my life without you—"

"Maybe I'll send a replacement." But it ceased to be funny as he said it.

After a moment she brightened slightly. "Let's do it again, Sos. Every minute counts."

"Hold on, woman! I'm not *that* sort of a superman!"

"Yes you are," she said. And she proved him wrong again.

XVIII

Nameless and weaponless, he marched. It was spring, almost two years after he had journeyed dejectedly toward the mountain. Sos had gone to oblivion; the body that clothed his brain today was a different one, his face a creation of the laboratory, his voice a croak.

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Plastic contacts made his eyes stare out invulnerably, and his hair sprouted without pigment.

Sos was gone—but secret memories remained with the nameless one, surging irrepressibly when evoked by familiar sights. He was anonymous but not feelingless. It was almost impossible to forget, as he traveled alone, missing the little bird on his shoulder, that he came as a machine of destruction. He could savor the forest trails and friendly cabins just as the young sworder had four years ago. A life and death ago!

He stood beside the circle: the one where Sol the Sword had fought Sol of all weapons for name and armament and, as it turned out, woman. What a different world it would have been, had that encounter never taken place!

He entered the cabin, recognizing the underworld manufacture and the crazy maintenance. Strange how his perceptions had changed! He had never really wondered before where the supplies had come from; he, like most nomads, had taken such things for granted. How had such naivete been possible?

He broke out supplies and prepared a gargantuan meal for himself. He had to eat enormously to maintain this massive body, but food was not much of a pleasure. Taste had been one of the many things that had suffered in the cause of increased power. He wondered whether in the past the surgeons had been able to perform their miracles without attendant demolition of peripheral sensitivity. Or had their machines taken the place of warriors?

A girl showed up at dusk, young enough and pretty enough, but when she saw his bare wrist she kept to herself. Hostels had always been excellent places to hunt for bracelets. He wondered whether the crazies knew about this particular aspect of their service.

He slept in one bunk, the girl courteously taking the one adjacent though she could have claimed privacy by establishing herself on the far side of the column. She glanced askance when she perceived that he was after all alone, but she was not concerned. His readings had also told him that before the Blast women had had to watch out for men, and seldom dared to sleep in the presence of a stranger. If that were true—though it was hardly creditable in a civilization more advanced than the present one—things had certainly improved. It was unthinkable that a man should require favors not freely proffered—or that a woman should withhold them capriciously. Yet Sosa had described the perils of her childhood, where tribes viewed women differently; not all the badness had been expunged.

The girl could contain her curiosity no longer. "Sir, if I may ask—where is your woman?"

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He thought of Sosa, pert little Sosa, almost too small to carry a full-sized bracelet, but big in performance and spirit. He missed her. "She is in the world of the dead," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said, misunderstanding as he had meant her to. A man buried his bracelet with his wife, if he loved her, and did not take another until his mourning was over. How was he to explain that it was not Sosa's death, but his own return to life that had parted them forever?

The girl still sat up in her bed, touching her nightied breast and showing her embarrassment. Her hair was pale. "It was wrong of me to ask," she said.

"It was wrong of me not to explain," he said graciously, knowing how ugly he would appear to this innocent.

"If you desire to—"

"No offense," he said with finality.

"None," she agreed, relieved.

Would this ordinary, attractive, artless girl sharing his cabin but not his bed—would she ever generate the violence of passion and sorrow he had known? Would some stout naive warrior hand her his bracelet tomorrow and travel to the mountain when he lost her?

It was possible, for that was the great modern dream of life and love. There was in the least of people, male and female, the capacity to arouse tumultuous emotion. That was the marvel and the glory of it all.

She fixed his breakfast in the morning, another courteous gesture that showed she had been well brought up. She tried not to stare as he stepped out of the shower. He blessed her and went his way, and she hers. These set customs were good, and had they met four years ago and she been of age then—

It took him only a week to cover the distance two men and a girl had traveled before. Some of the cabins were occupied, others not, but he kept to himself and was left alone. It surprised him a little that common manners had not changed; this was another quality of the nomad society that he had never properly appreciated until he learned how blunt things could be elsewhere.

But there were some changes. The markers were gone; evidently the crazies, perhaps prompted by his report to Jones, had brought their geiger clickers (manufactured in the underworld electronics shop) and resurveyed the area at last. That could mean that the moths and shrews were gone, too, or at least brought into better harmony with the rest of the ecology. He saw the tracks of hoofed animals and was certain of it.

The old camp remained, replete with its memories—and was still occupied! Men exercised in the several circles, and the big tent had been maintained beside the

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river. The fire-trench, however, had been filled in, the retrenchment leveled; this was the decisive evidence that the shrews no longer swarmed. They had finally given way to the stronger species: man.

But back nearer the fringe of the live radiation, where man could not go—who ruled there? And if there should ever be another Blast. . . .

Why was he surprised to find men here? He had known this would be the case; that was why he had come first to this spot. This had been the birthing place of the empire.

He approached the camp and was promptly challenged. "Halt! Which tribe are you bound to?" a hefty staffer demanded, eying his tunic as though trying to identify his weapon.

"No tribe. Let me see your leader."

"What's your name?"

"I am nameless. Let me see your leader."

The staffer scowled. "Stranger, you're overdue for a lesson in manners."

Sos reached out slowly and put one hand under the staff. He lifted.

"Hey, what are you—!" But the man had either to let go or to follow; he could not overcome. In a moment he was reaching for the sky, as Sos's single arm forced the staff and both the man's hands up.

Sos twisted with contemptuous gravity, and the staffer was wrenched around helplessly. "If you do not take me to your master, I will carry you there myself." He brought the weapon down suddenly and the man fell, still clinging to it.

Others had collected by this time to stare. Sos brought up his other hand, shifted his grip to the two ends of the rod, and while the staffer still foolishly hung on, bent it into a splendid half-circle. He let go, leaving the useless instrument in the hands of its owner.

Very shortly he was ushered into the leader's presence.

It was Sav.

"What can I do for you, strongster?" Sav inquired, not recognizing him under the mauled features and albino hair. "Things are pretty busy right now, but if you have come to enlist—"

"What you can do for me is to identify yourself and your tribe and turn both over to me." For once he was glad of the harshness inherent in his voice.

Sav laughed good-naturedly. "I'm Sav the Staff, in charge of staff-training for Sol, master of empire. Unless you come from Sol, I'm turning nothing over to you."

"I do not come from Sol. I come to vanquish him and rule in his stead."

"Just like that, huh? Well, mister nameless, you can start here. We'll put up a man against you and you'll either take him or join our tribe. What's your weapon?"

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"I have no weapon but my hands."

Sav studied him with interest. "Now let me get this straight. You don't have a name, you don't have a tribe, and you don't have a weapon—but you figure to take over this camp?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe I'm a little slow today, but I don't quite follow how you plan to do that."

"I will break you in the circle."

Sav burst out laughing. "Without a weapon?"

"Are you afraid to meet me?"

"Mister, I wouldn't meet you if you *had* a weapon. Not unless you had a tribe the size of this one to put up against it. Don't you know the rules?"

"I had hoped to save time."

Sav looked at him more carefully. "You know, you remind me of someone. Not your face, not your voice . . . You—"

"Select some man to meet me, then, and I will take him and all that follow him from you, until this tribe is mine."

Sav's look was pitying now. "You really want to tackle a trained staffer in the circle? With your bare hands?"

Sos nodded.

"This goes against the grain, but all right, then." He summoned one of his men and showed the way to a central circle.

The selected staffer was embarrassed. "But he has no weapon!"

"Just knock him down a couple of times," Sav advised. "He insists on doing it." Men were gathering; word had spread of Sos's feat with the guard's staff.

Sos removed his tunic and stood in short trunks and bare feet.

The bystanders gasped. The tunic had covered him from chin to knee and elbow, exposing little more than the hands and feet. The others had assumed that he was a large, chubby man, old because of the color of his hair and the leathery texture of his face. They had been curious about the strength he had shown, but not really convinced it had not been a fluke effort.

"Biceps like clubheads!" someone exclaimed. "Look at that neck!" Sos no longer wore the metal collar; his neck was a solid mass of horny callus and scar tissue.

The staffer assigned to meet him stood open-mouthed.

Sav pulled the man back. "Gom, take the circle," he said tersely.

A much larger staffer came forward, his body scarred and discolored by many encounters: a veteran. He held his weapon ready and stepped into the circle without hesitation.

Sos entered and stood with hands on hips.

Gom had no foolish scruples. He feinted several times to see what the nameless one would do, then landed a vicious blow to the side of the neck.

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Sos stood unmoved.

The staffer looked at his weapon, shrugged, and struck again.

After standing for a full minute, Sos moved. He advanced on Gom, reached out almost casually for the staff, and spun it away with a sharp twist of one wrist. He hurled it out of the circle.

Sos had never touched the man physically, but the staffer was out of business. He had tried to hold on to his weapon. Gom's fingers were broken.

"I have one man, and myself," Sos announced. "My man is not ready to fight again, so I will fight next for two."

Shaken, Sav sent in another warrior, designating a third as collateral. Sos caught the two ends of the staff and held them while the man tried vainly to free it. Finally Sos twisted and the weapon buckled. He let go and stepped back.

The man stood holding the S-shaped instrument, dazed. Sos only had to touch him with a finger, and the staffer stumbled out of the circle.

"I have four men, counting myself. I will match for four."

By this time the entire camp was packed around the circle. "You have already made your point," Sav said. "I will meet you."

"Yourself and your entire tribe against what I have here?" Sos inquired, mocking him.

"My skill against your skill," Sav said, refusing to be ruffled. "My group—against your service, and complete information about yourself. Who you are, where you came from, how you learned to fight like that, who sent you here."

"My service you may have, if you win it, or my life—but I am sworn to secrecy about the rest. Name other terms."

Sav picked up his staff. "Are you afraid to meet me?"

The men chuckled. Sav had nicely turned the dialogue on him. Who mocked whom?

"I cannot commit that information to the terms of the circle. I have no right."

"You have shown us your strength. We are curious. You ask me to put up my entire camp—but you won't even agree to put up your history. I don't think you really want to fight, stranger." The gathered men agreed vociferously, enjoying the exchange.

Sos appreciated certain qualities of leadership he had never recognized in Sav before. Sav had surely seen that he must lose if he entered the circle, and be shamed if he didn't. Yet he was forcing Sos to back off. Sav could refuse to do battle unless his terms were met, and do so with honor—and the word would quickly spread to Sol's other tribal leaders. It was a tactical masterstroke.

He would have to compromise. "All right," he said. "But I will tell only you. No one else."

"But *I* will tell whom I please!"

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Sos did not challenge that. He had to hope that if by some mischance he lost, he could still convince Sav in private of the necessity for secrecy. Sav was a sensible, easygoing individual; he would certainly listen and think before acting.

It was too bad that the smiling staffer had to be hurt by his friend.

Sav entered the circle. He had improved; his staff was blindingly swift and unerringly placed. Sos tried to catch the weapon and could not. The man had profited from observation of the two lesser warriors, and never let his staff stand still long enough to be grabbed. He also wasted no effort striking the column of gristle. He maneuvered instead for face shots, hoping to blind his antagonist, and rapped at elbows and wrists and feet. He also kept moving, as though certain that so solid a body would tire soon.

It was useless. Sos sparred a few minutes so that the staffer would not lose face before his men, then blocked the flying shaft and caught Sav's forearm. He yanked it to him and brought his other hand to bear.

There was a crack.

Sos let go and shoved the man out of the circle. No warrior present could mistake the finality of a dripping compound fracture. Men took hold of Sav as he staggered, hauled at his arm and set the exposed bone in place and bound the terrible wound in gauze, while Sos watched impassively from the circle.

It had not been strictly necessary. He could have won in a hundred kinder ways. But he had needed a victory that was serious and totally convincing. Had Sav lost indecisively, or by some trick blow that made him stumble from the circle like an intoxicated person, unmarked, the gathered witnesses would have been quick to doubt his capability or desire to fight, and the job would be unfinished. The break was tangible; Sav's men knew immediately that no one could have succeeded where their leader had failed, and that there had been no collusion and no cowardice.

Sos had inflicted dreadful pain, knowing that his erstwhile friend could bear it, in order to preserve what was more important: the loser's reputation.

"Put your second-in-command in charge of this camp," Sos snapped at Sav, showing no softness. "You and I take the trail—tomorrow morning, alone."

XIX

Two men moved out, one with his arm in cast and sling. They marched as far as the broken arm and loss of blood permitted and settled into a hostel for the evening, without company.

"Why?" Sav inquired.

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"Why the arm?"

"No. I understand that. Why you?"

"I have been assigned to take over Sol's empire. He will hardly meet me in the circle until I bring down his chief lieutenants."

Sav leaned back carefully, favoring the arm. "I mean why *you* —Sos."

First man, second day. He had betrayed himself already.

"You can trust me," Sav said. "I never told anyone about your nights with Sola, and I wasn't bound by the circle code then, not to you, I mean. I won't tell anyone now. The information belonged to me only if I won it from you, and I didn't."

"How did you know?"

"Well, I did room with you quite a spell, remember. I got to know you pretty well, and not just by sight. I know how you think and how you smell. I was awake some last night—little ache in my arm—and I walked by your tent."

"How did you know me sleeping when you did not know me awake?"

Sav smiled. "I recognized your snore."

"My—!" He hadn't even known he snored.

"And one or two other things fit into place," Sav continued. "Like the way you stared at the spot on the ground where our little tent used to be—and I know you weren't remembering me! And the way you hummed 'Red River Valley' today while we marched, same way Sola used to hum 'Greensleeves,' even if you do carry a tune even worse now than you did before. And the way you took care to make me look good in the circle, make me lose like a man. You didn't have to do that. You were taking care of me, same way I took care of you before."

"You took care of me?"

"You know—keeping the gals away from your tent all winter, even if I had to service 'em myself. Sending a man to bring Sol back when it was time. Stuff like that."

Sol had stayed away . . . until Sola was pregnant!

"You knew about Sol?"

"I'm just naturally nosy, I guess. But I can keep my mouth shut."

"You certainly can!" Sos took a moment to adjust himself to the changed situation. The staffer was a lot more knowledgeable and discreet than he had ever suspected. "All right, Sav. I'll tell you everything—and you can tell me how to keep my secrets so that nobody *else* catches on. Fair enough?"

"Deal! Except—"

"No exceptions. I can't tell anyone else."

"Except a couple are going to know anyway, no way to stop it. You get within a hundred feet of Sol, he'll know you. He's that way. And you won't fool Sola long, either. The others—well, if we can fake out Tor, no problem."

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Sav was probably right. Somehow the thought did not disturb Sos; if he did his honest best to conceal his identity, but was known by those closest to him anyway, he could hardly be blamed. The word would not spread.

"You asked 'why me?' That's the same question I asked myself. They put pressure on me, but it wouldn't have been enough if I hadn't had internal doubts. Why me? The answer is, because I built the empire, though they didn't know that. I started it, I organized it, I trained it, I left men after me who could keep it rolling. If it is wrong, then I have a moral obligation to dismantle it—and I may be the only one who can do it without calamitous bloodshed. I am the only one who really understands its nature and the key individuals within it—and who can defeat Sol in the circle."

"Maybe you better start at the beginning," Sav said. "You went away, then I heard you came back with the rope, and Sol beat you and you went to the mountain—"

It was late at night by the time the complete story had been told.

Tyl's camp was much larger than Sav's had been. This was an acquisition tribe, contrasted to the training tribe, and by itself numbered almost five hundred warriors. This time there was no stupidity at the entrance; Sav was a ranking member of the hierarchy, and there was the unmistakable ring of command in his normally gentle voice as he cut through obstacles. Ten minutes after they entered the camp they stood before Tyl himself.

"What brings you here unattended, comrade?" Tyl inquired cautiously, not commenting on the mending arm. He looked older, but no less certain of himself.

"I serve a new master. This is the nameless one, who sought me out and defeated me in the circle. Now he offers me and my tribe against you and yours."

Tyl contemplated Sos's tunic, trying to penetrate to the body beneath it. "With all due respect, excomrade, my tribe is more powerful than yours. He will have to meet my subchiefs first."

"Of course. Post a third of your tribe to correspond to mine. After the nameless one defeats your man, he will match both sections against the remainder. You can study him today and meet him tomorrow."

"You seem to have confidence in him," Tyl observed.

Sav turned to Sos. "Master, if you would remove your dress—"

Sos obliged, finding it easy to let Sav handle things. The man certainly had talent for it. This early acquisition had been most fortunate.

Tyl looked. "I see," he said, impressed. "And what is his weapon?" Then, "I see," again.

That afternoon Sos knocked

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out the subchief sworder with a single hammer blow of one fist to the midsection. He held the sword by the blade, having simply caught it in mid-thrust and held it. A slight crease showed along the callus covering the metallic mesh embedded in his palm where the edge had cut; that was all. He had closed upon the blade carefully, but the witnesses had not been aware of that. They had assumed that he had actually halted the full thrust with an unprotected hand.

Tyl, like Sav, was quick to learn. He, too, employed the sword, and he fenced with Sos's hands as though they were daggers, and with his head as though it were a club, and he kept his distance. It was wise strategy. The singing blade maintained an expert defense, and Tyl never took a chance.

But he forgot one thing: Sos had feet as well as hands and head. A sharp kick to the kneecap brought temporary paralysis there, interfering with mobility. Tyl knew he had lost, then, for even a narrow advantage inevitably grew, but he fought on, no coward. Not until both knees were dislocated did he attempt the suicide plunge.

Sos left the blade sticking in his upper arm and touched his fingers to the base of Tyl's exposed neck, and it was over.

Then he withdrew the blade and bound the wound together himself. It had been a stab, not a slash, and the metal reinforcement within the bone had stopped the point. The arm would heal.

When Tyl could walk, Sos added him to the party. They set out for the next major tribe, getting closer to Sol's own camp. Tyl traveled with his family, since Sos had not guaranteed any prompt return to the tribe, and Tyla took over household chores. The children stared at the man who had defeated their father, hardly able to credit it. They were too young yet to appreciate all the facts of battle and had not understood that Tyl had been defeated at the time he joined Sol's nascent group. There were no frank conversations along the way. Tyl did not recognize the nameless one, and Sav cleverly nullified dangerous remarks.

They caught up to Tor's tribe after three weeks. Sos had determined that he needed one more leader in his retinue before he had enough to force Sol into the circle. He now had authority over more than six hundred men—but eight tribes remained, some very large. Sol could still preserve his empire by refusing to let these tribes accept the challenge and by refraining from circle combat himself. But acquisition of a third tribe should make Sos's chunk of empire too big to let go. . . .

Tor's tribe was smaller than Tyl's and more loosely organized, but still a formidable spread. A cer-

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tain number of doubles teams were practicing, as though the encounter with the Pits had come out about even. Sos expected competent preparations for his coming, and he was not disappointed. Tor met him promptly and took him into private conference, leaving Sav and Tyl out of it.

"I see you are a family man," he said.

Sos glanced at his bare wrist. "I was once a family man."

"Oh, I see." Tor, searching for weakness, had missed. "Well, I understand you came out of nowhere, defeated Sav and Tyl, and mean to challenge Sol for his empire—and that you actually enter the circle without a weapon."

"Yes."

"It would seem foolish for me to meet you personally, since Tyl is a better fighter than I."

Sos did not comment.

"Yet it is not my nature to avoid a challenge. Suppose we do this: I will put my tribe up against yours—if you will meet my representative."

"One of your subchiefs? I will not put up six hundred men against a minor." But Sos's real concern was whether Tor recognized him.

"I did not say that. I said my representative, who is not a member of my group, against you, alone. If he beats you, you will release your men and go your way; Sol will reconquer them in time. If you overcome him, I will turn over my group to you, but I will remain in the service of Sol. I do not care to serve any other master at this time."

"This is a curious proposition." There had to be a hidden aspect to it, since Tor was always clever.

"Friend, *you* are a curious proposition."

Sos considered it, but discovered nothing inherently unfair about the terms. If he won, he had the tribe. If he lost, he was still free to try for Sol at a later date. It did not matter whom he fought; he would have to defeat the man sooner or later anyway, to prevent resurgence of the empire under some new master.

And it seemed that Tor did *not* recognize him, which was a private satisfaction. Perhaps he had worried too much about that.

"Very well. I will meet this man."

"He will be here in a couple of days. I have already sent a runner to fetch him. Accept our hospitality in the interim."

Sos got up to leave. "One thing," he said, remembering. "Who is this man?"

"His name is Bog. Bog the Club."

Trust wily Tor to think of that! The one warrior not even Sol had been able to defeat.

It was three days before Bog showed up, as big and happy as ever. He had not changed a bit in

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two years. Sos wanted to rush out and shake the giant's hand and hear him exclaim "Okay!" again, but he could not; he was a nameless stranger now, and would have to meet and overcome the man anonymously.

This selection made it clear why Tor had arranged the terms as they were. Bog was entirely indifferent to power in the tribal sense. He fought for the sheer joy of action and made no claims upon the vanquished. The messenger had only to whisper "good fight!" and Bog was on his way.

And Tor had chosen well in another respect, for Bog was the only man Sos knew of who shared virtual physical invulnerability. Others had tried to prevail over the nameless one by skill, and had only been vanquished. Bog employed no skill, just inexhaustible power.

The day was waning, and Tor prevailed upon Bog to postpone the battle until morning. "Tough man, long fight," he explained. "Need all day."

Bog's grin widened. "Okay!"

Sos watched the huge man put away food for three and lick his lips in anticipation as several lovely girls clustered solicitously around him and touched the bracelet upon his wrist. Sos felt nostalgia. Here was a man who had an absolute formula for perpetual joy: enormous power, driving appetites, and no concern for the future. What a pleasure it would be to travel with him again and bask in the reflected light of his happiness! The reality might have been troubling for others, but never for Bog.

Yet it was to preserve the goodness in the system that he fought now. By defeating Bog he would guarantee that there would always be free warriors for such as Bog to fight. The empire would never swallow them all.

They waited only long enough for the sun to rise to a reasonable height before approaching the circle in the morning. The men of the camp were packed so tightly that Tor had to clear a path to the arena. Everyone knew what the stakes were, except possibly Bog himself, who didn't care; but the primary interest was in the combat itself. Only twice, legend said, had Bog been stopped—once by the onset of night and once by a fluke loss of his weapon. No one had ever actually defeated him.

It was also said, however, that he never entered the circle against the net or other unfamiliar weapon.

Bog jumped in, already swinging his club enthusiastically, while Sos remained outside the ring and stripped to his trunks. He folded the long tunic carefully and stood up straight. The two men looked at each other while the audience studied both.

"They're the same size!" a man exclaimed, awed.

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Sos started. He, the same size as the giant? Impossible.

Nonetheless, fact. Bog was taller and broader across the shoulders, but Sos was now more solidly constructed. The doctor had given him injections, in the underworld operatory, to stimulate muscular development, and the inserted protective materials added to his mass. He was larger than he had been, and none of the added mass was fat. He probably weighed almost twice what he had when he first set out in search of adventure.

Each man had enormously overmuscled shoulders and arms, and a neck sheathed in scars; but where Bog slimmed down to small hips and comparatively puny legs, Sos had a midriff bulging with protective muscles and thighs so thick he found it awkward to run.

Now he carried no weapon: he *was* a weapon.

He stepped into the circle.

Bog proceeded as usual, swinging with indifferent aim at head and body. Sos ducked and took other evasive action. He had stood still to accept the blows of the staff, as a matter of demonstration, but the club was a different matter. A solid hit on the head by such as Bog could knock him senseless. The metal in his skull would not dent, but the brain within would smash itself against the barrier like so much jelly. The reinforced bones of arms and legs would not break, but even the toughened gristle and muscle would suffer if pinched between that bone and the full force of the club. Bog could hurt him.

Sos avoided the moving club and shot an arm up behind Bog's hand to block the return swing. He leaped inside and drove the other fist into Bog's stomach so hard the man was pushed backward. It was the rock-cracking blow.

Bog shifted hands and brought the weapon savagely down to smash Sos's hip. He stepped back to regain balance and continued the attack. He hadn't noticed the blow.

Sos circled again, exercising the bruised hip and marveling. The man was not exactly flabby in the stomach; that blow could have ruptured the intestines of an ordinary warrior. The way he had shifted grips on his club showed that there was more finesse to his attack than men had given him credit for. As a matter of fact, Bog's swings were not wild at all, now. They shifted angles regularly and the arcs were not wide. There was no time for a sword to cut in between them, or a staff, and lesser weapons would have no chance at all. Bog had an excellent all-purpose defense concealed within his showy offense.

Strange that he had never noticed this before. Was Bog's manifest stupidity an act? Had Sos, who should certainly have known better, assumed that a man as big and

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strong as Bog must be lacking in mental qualities? Or was Bog a natural fighter, like Sol, who did what he did unconsciously, and who won because his instincts were good?

Still, there would be weak points. There had to be. Sos kicked at an exposed knee, hardly having time to set up for the proper angle for dislocation—and had his own leg clipped by a seemingly accidental descent of the club. He parried the club arm again, leading it out of the way, and leaped to embrace Bog in a bear hug, catching his two hands together behind the man's back. Bog held his breath and raised the club high in the air and brought it down. Sos let go and shoved him away barely in time to avoid a head blow that would have finished the fight.

Yes, Bog knew how to defend himself.

Next time, Sos blocked the arm and caught it in both hands to apply the breaking pressure. It was no use; Bog tensed his muscles and was too strong. Bog flipped the club to the alternate hand again and blasted away at Sos's back, forcing another hasty retreat. Sos tried once more, pounding his reinforced knuckles into the arm just above the elbow, digging for nerves, but had to let go; the club was too dangerous to ignore. He could do a certain amount of weakening damage to Bog's arms which would in time incapacitate the man, but in the meantime he would be subjected to a similar amount of battery by the club, which would hardly leave him in fit condition to fight again soon.

It was apparent that simple measures would not do the job. While consciousness remained, Bog would keep fighting—and he was so constructed that he could not be knocked out easily. A strangle hold from behind? Bog's club could whip over the back or around the side to pulverize the opponent long before consciousness departed—and how could a forearm do what the rope could not? A hammer blow to the base of the skull? It was as likely to kill the man as to slow him down, Bog being what he was.

But he was vulnerable. The kick to the crotch, the stiffened finger to the eyeball . . . any rapid blow to a surface organ would surely bring him down.

Sos continued to dodge and parry, forearm against forearm. Should he do it? Did any need justify the deliberate and permanent maiming of a friend?

He didn't argue it. He simply decided to fight as he had to: fairly.

Just as the club would knock him out once it connected, so one of his own blows or grips would bring down Bog, when properly executed. Since Bog didn't know the meaning of defeat and would

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never give in to numbing blows or simple pain, there was no point in such tactics. He would have to end the contest swiftly and decisively —which meant accepting at least one full smash from the club as he set up his position. It was a necessary risk.

Sos timed the next pass, spun away from it, ducked his head and thrust out in the high stamping kick aimed for Bog's chin. The club caught him at the thigh, stunning the muscle and knocking him sidewise, but his heel landed.

Too high. It caught Bog's forehead and snapped his head back with force abetted by the impact of the club upon his leg. A much more dangerous blow than the one intended.

Sos dropped to the ground, roled over to get his good leg under him, and leaped up again, ready to follow up with a sustained knuckle-beat to the back of the neck. Bog could not swing effectively so long as he was pinned to the ground, and even he could not withstand more than a few seconds of—

Sos halted. Suddenly he knew what had happened.

The slight misplacement of the kick, providing added leverage against the head; the forward thrust of Bog's large body as he swung; the feedback effect of the club blow upon the leg; the very musculature constricting the clubber's neck—these things had combined to make the very special connection Sos had sought to avoid.

Bog's neck was broken.

He was not dead—but the damage was irreparable, here. If he survived, it would be as a paralytic. Bog would never fight again.

Sos looked up, becoming aware of the audience he had completely forgotten, and met Tor's eyes. Tor nodded gravely.

Sos picked up Bog's club and smashed it with all his force against the staring head.

XX

"Come with me," Sav said.

Sos followed him into the forest, paying no attention to the direction. He felt as he had when Stupid perished in the snow. Here was a great, perhaps slow-witted but happy fellow—abruptly dead in a manner no one had wanted or expected, least of all Sos himself. Sos had liked the hearty clubber; he had fought by his side. By the definitions of the circle, Bog had been his friend.

There were many ways he could have killed the man, had that been his intent, or maimed him, despite his power. Sos's efforts to avoid doing any real damage had been largely responsible for the prolongation of the encounter—yet had led to nothing. Perhaps there had been no way to defeat Bog without killing him. Perhaps in time Sos

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could convince himself of that, anyway.

At least he had seen to it that the man died as he might have wished: by a swift blow from a club. Small comfort.

Sav stopped and gestured. They were in a forest glade, a circular mound with a small, crude pyramid of stones at the apex. It was one of the places of burial and worship maintained by volunteer tribesmen who did not choose to turn over the bodies of their friends to the crazies for cremation.

"In the underworld—could they have saved him?" Sav inquired.

"I think so."

"But if you tried to take him there—"

"They would have blasted us both with the flame-thrower before we got within haling distance of the entrance. I am forbidden ever to return."

"Then this is best," Sav said.

They stood looking at the mound, knowing that Bog would soon lie within it.

"Sol comes to these churches every few days, alone," Sav said. "I thought you'd like to know."

Then it seemed that no time passed, but it had been a month of travel and healing, and he was standing beside another timeless mound and Sol was coming to pray.

Sol kneeled at the foot of the pyramid and raised his eyes to it. Sos dropped to his own knees beside him. They stayed there in silence for some time.

"I had a friend," Sos said at last. "I had to meet him in the circle, though I would not have chosen it. Now he is buried here."

"I, too," Sol said. "He went to the mountain."

"Now I must challenge you for an empire I do not want, and perhaps kill again, when all that I desire is friendship."

"I prayed here all day for friendship," Sol said, speaking of all the mounds in the world as one, and all times as one, as Sos had done. "When I returned to my camp, I thought my prayer was answered—but he required what I could not give." He paused. "I would give my empire, to have that friend."

"Why can't we two walk away from here, never to enter the circle again?"

"I would take only my daughter." He looked at Sos, for the first time since staff and rope had parted, and if he recognized him as anything more than the heralded nameless challenger, or found this unheralded mode of contact strange, he did not say. "I would give you her mother, since your bracelet is dead."

"I would accept her, in the name of friendship."

"In the name of friendship."

They stood up and shook hands. It was as close as they could come to acknowledging recognition.

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The camp was vast. Five of the remaining tribes had migrated to rejoin their master, anticipating the arrival of the challenger. Two thousand men spread across plain and forest with their families, sleeping in communal tents and eating at communal hearths. Literate men supervised distribution of supplies and gave daily instruction in reading and figuring to groups of apprentices. Parties trekked into the mountains, digging for the ore that the books said was there, while others cultivated the ground to grow the nutriative plants that other books said could be raised. Women practiced weaving and knitting in groups, and one party had a crude native loom. The empire was now too large to feed itself from the isolated cabins of a single area, too independent to depend upon any external source of clothing or weapons.

"This is Sola," Sol said, introducing the elegant, sultry high lady. He spoke to her: "I would give you to the nameless one. He is a powerful warrior, though he carries no weapon."

"As you wish," she said indifferently. She glanced at Sos, and through him. "Where is his bracelet? What should I call myself?"

"Keep the clasp I gave you. I will find another."

"Keep the name you bear. I have none better."

"You're crazy," she said, addressing both.

"This is Soli," Sol said as the little girl entered the compartment. He picked her up and held her at head height. She grasped a tiny staff and waved it dangerously.

"I'm an Amazon!" she said, poking the stick at Sos. "I'm fighting in circle."

They moved on to the place where the chieftains gathered: Sav and Tyl together, Tor and Tun and Neq and three others Sos did not recognize in another group. They spread out to form a standing circle as Sol and Sos approached.

"We have reached a tentative agreement on terms," Sav said. "Subject to approval by the two masters, of course."

"The terms are these," Sol said, not giving him a chance to continue. "The empire will be disbanded. Each of you will command the tribe you now govern in our names, and Tor his old tribe, but you will never meet each other in the circle."

They stared at him uncomprehendingly. "You fought already?" Tun inquired.

"I have quit the circle."

"Then we must serve the nameless one."

"I have quit the circle too," Sos said.

"But the empire will fall apart without one of you as master. No one else is strong enough!"

Sol turned his back on them.

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"It is done," he said. "Let's take our things and go."

"Wait a minute!" Tyl exclaimed, running stiff-legged after them. "You owe us an explanation."

Sol shrugged, offering none. Sos turned about and spoke. "Four years ago you all served small tribes or traveled alone. You slept in cabins or in private tents, and you did not need anything that was not provided. You were free to go and to do as you chose.

"Now you travel in large tribes and you fight for other men when they tell you to. You till the land, working as the crazies do, because your numbers are too great for the resources of any one area. You mine for metals, because you no longer trust the crazies to do it for you, though they have never broken trust. You study from books, because you want the things civilization can offer. But this is not the way it should be. We know what civilization leads to. It brings destruction of all the values of the circle. It brings competition for material things you do not need. Before long you will overpopulate the Earth and become a scourge upon it, like shrews who have overrun their feeding grounds.

"The records show that the end result of empire is—the Blast."

But he hadn't said it well.

All but Sav peered incredulously at him. "You claim," Tor said slowly, "that unless we remain primitive nomads, dependent upon the crazies, ignorant of finer things, there will be a second Blast?"

"In time, yes. That is what happened before. It is our duty to see that it never happens again."

"And you believe that the answer is to keep things as they are, disorganized?"

"Yes."

"So more men like Bog can die in the circle?"

Sos stood as if stricken. Was he on the right side, after all?

"Better that, than that we all die in the Blast," Sol put in surprisingly. "There are not enough of us, now, to recover again."

Unwittingly, he had undercut Sos's argument, since overpopulation was the problem of empire.

Neq turned on Sol. "Yet you preserve the circle by deserting it!"

Sav, who understood both sides, finally spoke. "Sometimes you have to give up something you love, something you value, so as not to destroy it. I'd call that sensible."

"I'd call it cowardice!" Tyl said.

Both Sol and Sos jumped toward him angrily.

Tyl stood firm. "Each of you defeated me in the circle. I will serve either. But if you fear to face each other for supremacy, I must call you what you are."

"You have no right to build an empire and throw it away like that," Tor said. "Leadership means responsibility."

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"Where did you learn all this 'history'?" Neq demanded. "I don't believe it."

"We're just beginning to cooperate like men, instead of playing like children," Tun said.

Sol looked at Sos. "They have no power over us. Let them talk."

Sos stood indecisively. What these suddenly assertive men were saying made distressing sense. How could he be sure that what the master of the underworld had told him was true? There were so many obvious advantages of civilization—and it had taken thousands of years for the Blast to come, before. Had it really been the fault of civilization, or had there been factors he didn't know about, that might no longer exist?

Little Soli appeared and ran toward Sol. "Are you going to fight now, Daddy?"

Tyl stepped ahead of him and managed to intercept her, squatting with difficulty since his knees were still healing. "Soli, what would you do if your daddy decided not to fight?"

She presented him with the round-eyed stare. "Not fight?"

No one else spoke.

"If he said he wouldn't go in the circle any more," Tyl prompted her. "If he went away and never fought again."

Soli burst out crying.

Tyl let her go. She ran to Sol. "You go in circle, Daddy!" she exclaimed. "Show him!"

It had happened again. Sol faced him, defeated. "I must fight for my daughter."

Sos struggled with himself, but knew that the peaceful settlement had flown. He saw, in a terrible revelation, that this, not name, woman or empire, had been the root of each of their encounters: the child. The child called Soli had been there throughout; the circle had determined which man would claim the name and privilege of fatherhood.

Sol could not back down, and neither could Sos. Bob, of the underworld, had made clear what would happen if Sos allowed the empire to stand.

"Tomorrow, then," Sos said, also defeated.

"Tomorrow—friend."

"The winner rules the empire!" Tyl shouted, and the others agreed.

Why did their smiles look lupine?

They ate together, the two masters with Sola and Soli. "You will take care of my daughter," Sol said. He did not need to define the circumstance further.

Sos only nodded.

Sola was more direct. "Do you want me tonight?"

Was this the woman he had longed for? Sos studied her, noting the voluptuous figure, the lovely features. She did not recognize him, he was certain—yet she had accepted an insulting alliance with complacency.

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"She—loved another," Sol said. "Now nothing matters to her, except power. It is not her fault."

"I still love him," she said. "If his body is dead, his memory is not. My own body does not matter."

Sos continued to look at her—but the image he saw was of little Sosa of the underworld, the girl who bore his bracelet. The girl Bob had threatened to send in his place, should Sos refuse to undertake the mission . . . to work her way into Sol's camp as anybody's woman and to stab Sol with a poisoned dart and then herself, leaving the master of empire dead and disgraced. The girl who would *still* be sent, if Sos failed.

At first it had been Sol's fate that had concerned him, though Bob never suspected this. Only by agreeing to the mission could Sos arrange to turn aside its treachery. But as the time of training passed, Sosa's own peril had become as important. If he betrayed the underworld now, she would pay the penalty.

Sol and Sosa: the two had never met, yet they controlled his destiny. He had to act to protect them both—and he dared tell neither why.

"In the name of friendship, take her!" Sol exclaimed. "I have nothing left to offer."

"In the name of friendship," Sos whispered. He was sickened by the whole affair, so riddled with sacrifice and dishonor. He knew that the man whom Sola embraced in her mind would be the one who had gone to the mountain. She might never know the truth.

And the woman *he* embraced would be Sosa. *She* would never know, either. He had not realized until he left her that he loved her more.

At noon the next day they met at the circle. Sos wished there were some way he could lose, but he knew at the same moment that this was no solution. Sol's victory would mean his own death; the underworld had pronounced it.

Twice he had met Sol in battle, striving to win and failing. This time he would strive in his heart to lose, but had to win. Better the humiliation of one, than the death of two.

Sol had chosen the daggers. His handsome body glistened in the sunlight—but Sos imagined with sadness the way that body would look after the terrible hands of the nameless one closed upon it. He looked for some pretext to delay the onset, but found none. The watchers were massed and waiting, and the commitment had been made. The masters had to meet, and there was no friendship in the circle. Sos would spare his friend if he were able—but he had to win.

They entered the circle together and faced each other for a mo-

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ment, each respecting the other's capabilities. Perhaps each still hoped for some way to stop it, even now. There was no way. It had been unrealistic to imagine that this final encounter could be reneged. They were the masters: no longer, paradoxically, their own masters.

Sos made the first move. He jumped close and drove a sledgehammer fist at Sol's stomach—and caught his balance as the effort came to nothing. Sol had stepped aside, as he had to, moving more swiftly than seemed possible, as he always did—and a shallow slash ran the length of the challenger's forearm. The fist had missed, the knife had not wounded seriously, and the first testing of skill had been accomplished.

Sos had known better than to follow up with a second blow in the moment Sol appeared to be off balance. Sol was never caught unaware. Sol had refrained from committing the other knife, knowing that the seeming ponderosity of Sos's hands was illusory. Tactics and strategy at this level of skill looked crude only because so many simple ploys were useless or suicidal; finesse seemed like bluff only to the uninitiated.

They circled each other, watching the placements of feet and balance of torso rather than face or hands. The expression in a face could lie, but not the attitude of the body; the motion of a hand could switch abruptly, but not that of a foot. No major commitment could be made without preparation and reaction. Thus Sol seemed to hold the twin blades lightly, while Sos hardly glanced at them.

Sol moved, sweeping both points in toward the body, one high, the other low. Sos's hands were there, closing about the two wrists as the knives were balked by protected shoulder and belly, and Sol was pinioned. He applied pressure slowly, knowing that the real ploy had not yet been executed.

Sol was strong, but he could not hope to compete with his opponent's power. Gradually his arms bent down as the vice-like grip intensified, and the fingers on the knives loosened. Then Sol flexed both wrists—and they spun about within the grip! No wonder his body shone: he had greased it.

Now the daggers took on life of their own, flipping over together to center on the imprisoning manacles. The points dug in, braced against clamped hands, feeling for the vulnerable tendons, and they were feather sharp.

Sos had to let go. His hardened skin could deflect lightning slashes, but not the anchored probing he was exposed to here. He released one wrist only, yanking tremendously at the other, trying to break it while his foot lashed against the man's inner thigh. But

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Sol's free blade whipped across unerringly, to bury itself in the flesh of Sos's other forearm, and it was not the thigh but the hard bone of hip that met the moving foot. It was far more dangerous to break with Sol than to close with him.

They parted, the one with white marks showing the crushing pressure exerted against him, the other with spot punctures and streaming blood from one arm. The second testing had passed. It was known that if the nameless one could catch the daggers, he could not hold them, and the experienced witnesses nodded gravely. The one was stronger, the other faster, and the advantage of the moment lay with Sol.

The battle continued. Bruises appeared upon Sol's body, and countless cuts blossomed on Sos's, but neither scored definitively. It had become a contest of attrition.

This could go on for a long time, and no one wanted that. A definite decision was required, not a suspect draw. One master had to prevail over the other. By a certain unvoiced mutual consent they cut short the careful sparring and played for the ultimate stakes.

Sol dived, in a motion similar to the one Sos had used against him during their first encounter, going not for the almost invulnerable torso but the surface muscles and tendons of the legs. Sol's success would cripple Sos and put him at a fatal disadvantage. He leaped aside, but the two blades followed as Sol twisted like a serpent. He was on his back now, feet in the air, ready to smite the attacker. He had been so adept at nullifying prior attacks that Sos was sure the man was at least partially familiar with weaponless techniques. This might also explain Sol's phenomenal success as a warrior. The only real advantage Sos had was brute strength.

He used it. He hunched his shoulders and fell upon Sol, pinning him by the weight of his body and closing both hands about his throat. Sol's two knives came up, their motion restricted but not blocked, and stabbed into the gristle on either side of Sos's own neck. The force of each blow was not great, since the position was quite awkward, but the blades drove again and again into the widening wounds. The neck was the best protected part of his body, but it could not sustain this attack for long.

Sos lifted himself and hurled the lighter man from side to side, never releasing the cruel constriction, but his position, too, was improper for full effect. Then, as his head took fire with the exposure of vital nerves, he knew that he was losing this phase; the blades would bring him down before Sol finally relinquished that tenacious consciousness.

It would not be possible to finish it gently.

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He broke, catching Sol's hair to hold his head down, and hammered his horny knuckle into the exposed windpipe.

Sol could not breathe and was in excruciating pain. His throat had been crushed. Still the awful daggers searched for Sos's face, seeking, if not victory, mutual defeat. It was not in Sol to lose in the circle.

Sos used his strength once more. He caught one blade in his hand, knowing that this edge could not slip free from his flesh. With the other hand he grabbed again for the hair. He stood up, carrying Sol's body with him. He whirled about—and flung his friend out of the circle.

As quickly as he had possession of the circle, he abdicated it, diving after his fallen antagonist. Sol lay on the ground, eyes bulging, hands clasping futilely at his throat. Sos ripped them away and dug his fingers into the sides of the neck, massaging it roughly. His own blood dripped upon Sol's chest as he squatted above him.

"It's over!" someone screamed. "You're out of the circle! Stop!"

Sos did not stop. He picked one dagger from the ground and cut into the base of Sol's throat, using the knowledge his training in destruction had provided.

A body fell upon him, but he was braced against it. He lifted one great arm and flung the person away without looking. He widened the incision until a small hole opened in Sol's trachea; then he put his mouth to the wound.

More men fell upon him, yanking at his arms and legs, but he clung fast. Air rushed into the unconscious man's lungs as Sos exhaled, and his friend was breathing again, precariously.

"Sav! It's me, Sav," a voice bellowed in his ear. "Red River! Let go! I'll take over!"

Only then did Sos lift blood-flecked lips and surrender to unconsciousness.

He woke to pain shooting along his neck. His hand found bandages there. Sola leaned over him, soft of expression, and mopped the streaming sweat from his face with a cool sponge. "I know you," she murmured as she saw his eyes open. "I'll never leave you—nameless one."

Sos tried to speak, but not even the croak came out. "Yes, you saved him," she said. "Again. He can't talk any more, but he's in better shape than you are. Even though you won." She leaned down to kiss him lightly. "It was brave of you to rescue him like that—but nothing is changed."

Sos sat up. His neck exploded into agony as he put stress upon it, and he could not turn his head, but he kept on grimly. He was in the main tent, in what was evidently Sola's compartment. He looked about by swiveling his body. No one else was present.

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Sola took his arm gently. "I'll wake you before he goes. I promise. Now lie down before you kill yourself—again."

Everything seemed to be repeating. She had cared for him like this once long ago, and he had fallen in love with her. When he needed help, she was—

Then it was another day. "It's time," she said, waking him with a kiss. She had donned her most elegant clothing and was as beautiful as he had ever seen her. It had been premature to discount his love for her; it had not died.

Sol was standing outside with his daughter, a bandage on his throat and discoloration remaining on his body, but otherwise fit and strong. He smiled when he saw Sos and came over to shake hands. No words were necessary. Then he placed Soli's little hand in Sos's and turned away.

The men of the camp stood in silence as Sol walked past them, away from the tent. He wore a pack but carried no weapon.

"Daddy!" Soli cried, wrenching away from Sos and running after him.

Sav jumped out and caught her. "He goes to the mountain," he explained gently. "You must stay with your mother and your new father."

Soli struggled free again and caught up to Sol. "Daddy!"

Sol turned, kneeled, kissed her and turned her to face the way she had come. He stood up quickly and resumed his walk. Sos remembered the time he had tried to send Stupid down the mountain.

"Daddy!" she cried once more, refusing to leave him. "I go with you!" Then, to show she understood: "I die with you."

Sol turned again and looked beseechingly at the assembled men.

No one moved.

Finally he picked Soli up and walked out of the camp.

Sola put her face to Sos's shoulder and sobbed silently, refusing to go after her daughter. "She belongs to him," she said through her tears. "She always did."

As he watched the lonely figures depart, Sos saw what was in store for them. Sol would ascend the mountain, carrying the little girl. He would not be daunted by the snow or the death that awaited him. He would drive on until overwhelmed by the cold, and he would fall at last with his face toward the top, shielding his daughter's body with his own until the end.

Sos knew what would happen then and who would be waiting to adopt a gallant husband and a darling daughter. There would be the chase in the recreation room, perhaps, and special exercise for Soli. It had to be, for Sosa would recognize the child. The child she had longed to bear herself. . . .

Take her! he thought. Take her —in the name of love.

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While Sos remained to be the architect of the empire's quiet destruction, never certain whether he was doing the right thing. He had built it in the name of another man; now he would bring it down at the behest of a selfish power clique whose purpose was to prevent civilization from arising on the surface. To prevent *power* from arising. . . .

Sos had always been directed in key decisions by the action of other men, just as his romancing had been directed by those women who reached for it. Sol had given him his name and first mission; Dr. Jones had given him his weapon; Sol had sent him to the mountain, and Bob had sent him back. Sol's lieutenants had forced the mastership upon him, not realizing that he was the enemy of the empire.

Would the time ever come when he made his own decisions? The threat that had existed against Sol now applied against Sos: if he did not dismantle the empire, someone would come for him, someone he would have no way to recognize or guard against, and hostages would die. Three of them, one a child. . . .

He looked at Sola, lovely in her sorrow, and knew that the woman he loved more would belong to Sol. Nothing had changed. Dear little Sosa—

Sos faced the men of his empire, thousands strong. They thought him master now—but was he the hero, or the villain?

FAUNAS

When I was young, I loved in thought to plod
The lands of long ago, when creatures trod
The earth, with spines or fangs, or talon-shod,
Like none that lives today. I wished some god
Would whisk me back to stride the selfsame sod
As mammoth, saber-tooth, or sauropod,
And others just as odd.

But now I know that on this present sphere,
However sane, conventional, and drear
My swarming fellow-anthropoids appear,
Beneath the fragile civilized veneer
Of men lurk spirits every bit as queer
As brontosaurus or titanothere,
And worthier of fear.

—L. Sprague de Camp

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We have all sorts of out-of-the-ordinary biographical notes left over from Gahan Wilson's first story for us (THE POWER OF THE MANDARIN, *December 1967*). *We'd be negligent indeed if we kept from you the information that Mr. Wilson's father invented the steel venetian blind; or that numbered among Mr. Wilson's ancestors and/or relatives are William Jennings Bryan and Phineas Taylor Barnum; or that Mr. Wilson did a stretch as a boy mentalist, in which he did mind reading routines at parties for money. "I gave it up because they believed it so easily it got a little scary." There's more, but it will have to wait for the next story; meanwhile there's the chilling item below to read and consider.*

HARRY'S GOLDEN YEARS

by Gahan Wilson

A LITTLE SNIPPED OFF HERE, A little sewn on there, a couple of tightenings, a couple of loosenings, some clearings out of the old tubes, and Harry Van Deventer was as good as new. Or almost. Good enough, at least.

Harry tied the decorative bow on the waist of his coverall and looked at himself, with pleasure, in the mirror. Harry didn't know the mirror took the grey out of his skin and made it rosy pink, he didn't know it soft-focused the wrinkles and faded the blue under his eyes, so he figured he looked pretty good. He smiled and patted his belly, which the surgeons had flattened as an afterthought. Harry didn't know about that, either.

"Not bad," he said, softly.

The door dilated and the nurse came in. She was really a looker, really built. Harry remembered what a wild one she'd been last night and smiled. He was pleased when he remembered things. A little saliva ran out of the corner of his mouth.

"All set and ready, Mr. Van Deventer?" asked the nurse. Harry nodded. "Raring to go," he said.

The nurse looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry about last night Mr. Van Deventer," she said. "The way I threw myself at you, I mean."

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She looked at him, blushed, and looked quickly down again. "I just couldn't help myself," she said.

Harry shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "That's all right," he said. "What the hell. It doesn't matter."

She looked at him with earnest relief. "I just *knew* you'd understand," she said.

Harry began to fidget. "So, where's the doctor?" he asked.

Outside, in the street, Harry tried to remember what had happened with the doctor, when he'd said goodbye, but he wasn't able to pull it back. The doctor had asked him to do this and that, he remembered, take pills or something, and it had made him mad. Who did that doctor think he was? Harry was about to get mad all over again when a taxi came down and landed beside him.

"Want a ride, Mr. Van Deventer?" asked the driver.

"Yeah," said Harry, climbing in. "Only I ain't sure where I want to go, yet."

"Anyplace you want, Mr. Van Deventer," said the driver.

Harry looked at the back of the driver's neck and wondered why he always kept getting the same drivers over and over.

"Some nice place," he said. "I just been to the hospital. I want to relax."

"Just been to the hospital, huh, Mr. Van Deventer?" said the driver. "Jeez, that's tough."

"Ah, it's all right," said Harry.

The driver activated a device which judged Harry's physical condition and gauged his mood. Of course Harry had no idea what was going on. A little computer ticked over and flipped a card into the driver's lap. The driver glanced at it.

"How about Fat Lucy's, Mr. Van Deventer?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"A real swell place. You could let some steam off. You'll love it, no kidding, Mr. Van Deventer."

"Terrific," said Harry.

Then he had a second thought. An annoyed expression crossed his face.

"Hold it," he said. "How much does it cost? It ain't a clip joint, is it?"

"Oh, no sir, Mr. Van Deventer," said the driver, hurriedly. "You don't want to worry about that. I wouldn't take you to no place like that, you can bet, Mr. Van Deventer."

"All right, then," said Harry, settling back. "It's just that I heard some of you guys take people to clip joints, is all."

"You can forget about a thing like that in my cab, Mr. Van Deventer," said the driver, turning to smile nervously at Harry.

"I said all right."

The driver swallowed and looked straight ahead.

Fat Lucy's was an all right place as far as Harry was concerned. Right away, right when he came in,

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a big blonde walked up to him.

"God, I been waiting for you all my life," she said. She couldn't keep her hands off him. "Jesus, where you been?"

"Around," said Harry.

He had a swell time. He couldn't remember the middle part too clearly, some waiter or other had said something fresh, and he hadn't liked it, but the rest of it was great. The girl got all upset when he was leaving.

"Christ, you've got to come back," she said.

"Yeah, sure," said Harry.

But he really didn't mean it. He just said it to make her happy. He couldn't help the way they all felt about him.

Back at his place, Harry had a bath and then checked his money chute. A lot of it had piled up while he was away. He didn't try to figure how much it was, he never did. He went to sleep.

While he was asleep, the accountants came in and had him sign a few papers. Years ago, when Harry had got tired of details, they'd worked it out so he could sign things in his sleep without waking up.

"The old bastard," said one accountant.

"Look," said another, "stop complaining. You're sitting pretty."

Harry woke that morning feeling restless but not sure just what he wanted to do. He turned on the television set and saw that they were doing his life story again. He sat and watched it for awhile and then grew tired of it and went to the bathroom.

The bathroom was a real mess. It was all banged up. He must have got mad at something or other not working, but he couldn't remember. He'd really done a job on the shower. Anyhow, it didn't matter. They'd fix it up.

He had some trouble tying the decorative bow on his coverall, but he finally got it right. The bow had a paisley pattern and tassels on the edges.

It was a nice day, so he told the taxi driver to just fly over the city for a little. He looked down and there was the building with his name on the top. It was the biggest building in the city, and it was his. Harry never went there anymore, hadn't for years. Let them worry about it.

He glanced over at the far horizon and saw a long strip of green. He knew it was something, but he couldn't think what. Then it came back to him.

"That's the country, ain't it?"

The driver looked where he pointed. "Yeah, that's right, Mr. Van Deventer," he said.

"Let's go there," said Harry. "I had fun there, once."

"You bet, Mr. Van Deventer," said the driver, and sent a few messages ahead without Harry knowing.

By the time they arrived in the

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country, it was ready. The taxi landed by a farm, and Harry had no sooner climbed out when a farmer came smiling up to him.

"Howdy, stranger," said the farmer. "Usually I don't take to strangers, but there's something I like a lot about your face."

The farmer gave Harry a fishing pole and told him how to hold it over a circular pond which was located in the middle of the farmyard. In no time at all Harry had caught dozens of shiny fish. A crowd of country people came to watch Harry at it and to tell him what a really sensational fisherman he was.

Something or other happened just before lunch which Harry couldn't quite remember. It had to do with some guy who wasn't cheerful, like the other country people, and who had said something rotten about Harry's fishing, and that made Harry mad.

Anyhow, at lunch he was dressed in farmer's clothes because his coveralls had got stained with something or other; nobody was clear what. Whatever it was had to be washed out before it set into the cloth, they said.

The lunch was a lot of fun with everybody eating the fish Harry had caught and telling him how good they were, and then, when lunch was done, the farmer's daughter had taken Harry aside and told him how crazy about him she was, and they had gone off to the barn.

"Oh, stranger, you were wonderful," said the farmer's daughter, after they were done. "How did you get to be so wonderful?"

"I don't know," said Harry.

He was picking at the straw on which they lay, and he turned to the farmer's daughter and held up a handful of the stuff.

"Where do you get this from?" he asked.

She looked at him oddly for a half second and then gave a toothy smile.

"Why, we grow it in the fields, stranger," she said.

"Show me," said Harry.

There wasn't much she could do except walk him out and show him. She would have let the others know, but she didn't have any communicator because they don't have those all around in the country like they do in the city.

Harry seemed to enjoy the fields, and he walked on and on. The farmer's daughter grew more worried as they drew further away. She knew everybody would figure they were still in the barn, and her instructions had been to always keep Harry within easy reach, just in case.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing ahead.

"That's a bull, stranger," said the farmer's daughter. "But you don't want to mess with it, honey. It's dangerous."

Harry frowned at her.

"What do I care?" he asked. "I'm

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going over there and have a look at it, OK?"

"Oh, no, stranger," she said, holding his arm. "You really want to stay away from it."

Harry jerked his arm away. "What are you doing?" he asked. "You giving me orders?"

The girl turned pale. "No, it's not that, stranger," she said. "It's just that you shouldn't fool around with that thing."

Harry's face was red now, and there were little drops of perspiration all over it. He began to breathe heavily.

"What do you mean, you bitch?" he shrieked. "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?"

He hit her a terrible blow with his fist, which dislocated her jaw and knocked out several teeth. Then, when she'd fallen, he kicked her several times, each time hard enough to lift her body from the ground.

Afterwards, he walked slowly away from her, toward the bull, wondering vaguely what it was he had forgotten. A country girl had said something he hadn't liked, he remembered.

The farmer's daughter managed, somehow, to drag herself far enough back to be spotted by one of the others. When they got to Harry, he was lying mangled by an oak tree, and the bull was cropping grass in a corner far away.

They flew in the medical team at once, of course, along with the head accountant who always accompanied them, just in case. The doctors patched and sewed and taped Harry together, and then the surgeon stood and snapped off his plastic gloves.

"Will he live, doctor?" asked the accountant.

The doctor sighed and shook his head.

"Yes," he said.

ABOUT THE COVER

Chesley Bonestell's cover painting depicts the Trifid Nebula, from a color transparency taken by the 48" Schmidt telescope on Mt. Palomar. On a portion of a planet of curious crystalline formation, a spaceman finds his ship shattered by a meteor, his companions dead.

Chesley Bonestell's paintings are presently on exhibit at the Hayden Planetarium in New York City.

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Stephen Barr's latest story is the entertaining tale of Jugby, who wanted to be an explorer and had discovered that he liked walking—but only in the rain. He ended up as a businessman with a personality like a half-filled balloon and a desire to change places, to "get out of myself," as he put it.

THE EVAPORATION OF JUGBY

by Stephen Barr

AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-SEVEN, Jugby realized that the only reason he had become a businessman was that his parents had given him the name of Wadworth. When people said "Wadworth" it seemed to make them pull in their chins, which lent a solemn air to the occasion, and one thing leading to another, Wadworth Jugby found himself a highly respected though rather ineffectual vice-president of a department store. Vice-president —it had recently dawned on him —in charge of nothing special.

There was, though, another reason for his rather minor success: people liked him. He was not bad looking, but that was about all you could say. If his friends were asked to describe him they would have said that his eyebrows were always up, but beyond that he was unmemorable. He wasn't a fool, either, but when he attempted to express himself, the banality of his words was increased by being interlarded with "ers" and "I-mean-to-says". He attempted to alleviate this drabness by overemphatic gestures, but it didn't help much. He was compactly built and moved well, yet he was always dropping things. About the only peculiarity he had that didn't annoy anyone was walking in the rain. If the skies clouded over and it began to pour, so that anybody in his right mind would want to stay home, Jugby would get a rapt look and say, "I believe, er, I'll go for a walk."

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Even this irritated the less broad-minded of his friends: "Don't you see it's *raining*?" they'd say, and he'd make a series of hand signals that suggested Patagonian sign language, and which meant that, (*a*) he knew it, and (*b*) he liked it. In spite of all this, people found him appealing. It puzzled his friends that he was unmarried, but when it came to the point, Jugby felt himself to be outside of the situation—a spectator.

One evening at his apartment in late summer, he was discussing this with his best friend, Dan Jackson, who was a research physicist in a plant in New Jersey.

"My theory about you," Dan said, "is that you feel outside of relationships—of situations—because you *want* to be outside."

Jugby's eyebrows went, if possible, higher, and he moved his hand as if he were slicing the air. "Er, yes. Precisely—I, er, wish I *could* get out of myself!" He smiled, and Dan thought it was Jugby's smile that was the main reason he liked him. "I mean to say," Jugby went on, "I'd like to change places, if you know what I mean. With, er, all sorts of people."

"I remember your saying that in college," Dan remarked. "You wanted to be an athlete, but you never did anything about it. Our senior year you were going to take up astronomy, but you never did anything about that either, and then you wanted to be an explorer."

"Well, I like walking . . ."

"Yes, but only in the rain, you dodo. How about giving me a drink?"

"You bet—I'll get, er, the whiskey . . ."

"No! Let me—you'll only drop it." But Dan was too late. "Well, never mind; come over to my place," he said. "I was going to suggest it anyway. I've got something to show you." Jugby made a few inarticulate sounds and some very forcible gestures which Dan interpreted to mean that he would be delighted. When they got to Dan's apartment, after having a highball, Dan said, "When I was talking about you wanting to change places, I was leading up to something. How would you like to change places with *me* for a day?"

Jugby looked nonplussed and said, "How do you mean? You take over for me at the store? And, er, I would . . ." A look of distress came to him. "But I couldn't *possibly* do your work at, er, the plant! Besides, they'd never let me in your lab, if you know what I mean."

"Don't worry about that part of it. You'd be in my body and I'd be in yours. Now, don't start to argue —" he added, as he saw Jugby begin to make swimming motions. "I've worked out a gadget—only don't ask me to explain it to you . . . it's perfectly safe. The point is we'll swap bodies—as for my job, just be noncommittal and pre-

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tend to do a lot of paper work. No one there can read my handwriting, anyway. Besides, they leave me alone most of the time."

If Jugby saw the significance in Dan's asking nothing about Jugby's duties at the store, and whether he'd be able to perform them, he showed no sign. Perhaps it was because in his heart he felt anyone could do his job. "When do we start?" he said. "What I mean is, er, when do we, er, swap bodies?"

It was characteristic of him that he had no questions about how the exchange was to be effected. "Any time you feel like it," Dan said. "But don't you want to see the gadget?" He went to his desk and brought back something that resembled a transistor radio, with pairs of electrodes sticking out on opposite sides. "A triumph of miniaturization, if you ask me."

"What?" Jugby could suggest a puzzled frown without lowering his eyebrows—some monkeys can do this.

"Oh, never mind," Dan said. "How about right now?"

"Oh boy!" Jugby said, starry-eyed. "Just to be somebody else for a change!"

Dan was amused but a little irritated. "You'd still be you, and I'd still be me, chum. We'd be in each other's bodies, that's all: like the book 'Vice Versa.' Ever read it?" The other shook his head. "It's a kids' book—English—came out before you and I were born. It's about a father and son changing places—the kid's a horrid little schoolboy and he practically wrecks his father's business. Meanwhile, the father, who's a stuffy bastard, has to go to the son's school, and he throws his weight around and tries to get pompous with the masters, and gets thoroughly sat on. The point is you and I are too smart for that. You brief me on whatever it is you do at the store, and I'll play it cool and be noncommittal as the deuce. Perhaps we could do it tomorrow morning, and meanwhile you can fill me in."

Jugby, without further questioning the validity of the project they were embarking on, filled him in. It didn't take long—he reflected sadly that there was very little to tell. "I guess I'm what you might call, er, a figurehead."

"Well, you bed down here, and we can get cracking in the morning."

Jugby agreed, and the next day, after breakfast, they faced one another in the living room. Dan held his triumph of miniaturization in one hand. "O.K.?"

"Don't we have to, er, change clothes?"

"No. Actually it's our psyches that change places—not our bodies. Here: we put it between us and you hold *these,* and I hold *these* . . ."

"All right."

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"Then I turn this switch."

"Then what . . .? Good *Heavens!*" Jugby—the one that felt he was Jugby—stared out of Dan Jackson's eyes at what seemed to be a mirror. Then he smiled—it was Dan's sardonic smile, of course—and got a rapt look. He had accepted the fact of their exchange the moment he realized it had happened. "How wonderful!" he said. "I'm not *me* any more!"

"Yes, you are, you dodo. You've just got my body. And my job, so get a wiggle on—you've barely got time to make it to the plant."

Jugby left with a dreamy look, and Dan Jackson went to the bathroom mirror to see how it felt to look like somebody else. "Poor old Wadworth!" he muttered. "Must remember to do his gestures. Hope my voice is O.K." He repeated "Hope my voice is O.K." louder, but it is hard to hear one's own voice. He remembered that Jugby hadn't sounded like himself, and assumed that all would be well. Nothing much could go wrong, just so long as his friend followed instructions and kept quiet. A little later he walked across town to the department store and took an elevator to the top floor and Jugby's office.

"Morning, Mr. Jugby," the blonde secretary said, and gave him a motherly look. "Could you sign these?" She held a sheaf of letters, but instead of handing them to him directly, she walked ahead of him and put them on his desk as he sat down. Afraid I'd drop them, Dan thought. The motherly look reminded him of his sister, Claire. It was the way she always looked at Jugby. For years Dan had expected them to fall in love in the ordinary way and, for Pete's sakes, get married, but, no—Jugby seemed attracted but stayed aloof, while with Claire it never got beyond the maternal.

"Why, er, yes—that is, I'd be delighted," Dan said, making circular motions. He picked up the desk pen and dropped it. Damned good, he told himself. He got through the day without any noticeable slips, and at no time was he called upon to make any decisions except whether to run a half-page or a full-page ad for a coming dress sale. He gave an equivocal answer and no one seemed put out. In the early afternoon there was a short thunderstorm, and he caught the blonde secretary covertly watching him. She appeared to be puzzled that he did not go out. At five he went home. Jugby wouldn't be back for another forty-five minutes. They had agreed to reverse the exchange as soon as he arrived and to compare notes, but an hour went by and there was no sign of Jugby. Probably forgot how to get back here, Dan thought.

The phone rang and he answered it. "Dan?" It was the voice of his immediate superior at the plant. "This is Byron—did you get

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back all right?" Dan reassured him, apprehensively. "Well, you'll be glad to hear it works! We stayed overtime to check it out, and it's terrific! So don't feel bad about dropping that transformer—they think it can be mended."

"How *what* worked?" Dan couldn't help asking.

There was a slight pause, and Byron's voice said, "Are you perfectly sure you're all right? I'm talking about the setting you suggested for the modifier, naturally. You don't sound like your usual self, Dan. As a matter of fact you've been acting oddly all day—are you *sure* you're O.K.?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Dan said hurriedly. "It's just that I've not been getting enough sleep lately . . ."

"You certainly had us guessing for a time, there, feller. And going out in that thunderstorm without an umbrella or anything. What got into you?"

"I don't know. So the setting worked out all right?"

"Terrific. It's completely unorthodox, of course, but . . . well, we'll discuss that tomorrow." Dan hung up as Jugby came in.

"I got, er, sidetracked," he said, and sat down. Dan noticed that except for the hesitation, Jugby not only looked but sounded like him —but he looked apologetic, too.

"Byron Rivers just phoned to say that I . . . I should say *you* made a highly successful change in the setting of the modifier."

"Is that what it was? I'm afraid I . . . well, dropped a piece of apparatus."

"Don't worry about that—they're fixing it. But what was it you did with the modifier?"

"I haven't the least idea. I was being noncommittal the way you said, and they asked me something, and I . . . well, I mean to say, I nodded and they said 'No *kidding!*' and I went on sort of nodding and they all seemed very surprised." He began to smile and made vehement motions signifying a left turn. "It was wonderful! I'm sorry about dropping that thing, but I was never so happy in my life! Just to be out of oneself . . ." It was the longest static-free statement that Dan had ever heard him make.

The bell rang and Dan, forgetting that he and Jugby were still reversed, went to the door. It was his sister, Claire, and she gave him a motherly, compassionate look. "Why, how nice to see you, Wadworth!" she said and came in. "Hello, Danny," she added to Jugby, who dropped his cigarette.

"I'm not . . . that is, *he* is . . . I mean to say, we are . . ." He drew a pentagram in midair. Claire stared at them in turn.

"What have you two been up to?"

Dan shrugged. "I guess we'll have to let her in on it, won't we?" Jugby nodded, and Dan explained to his sister. At first she was unable

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to understand—Wadworth was acting in the most un-Wadworthy manner, and expressing himself quite clearly, but he kept saying he was her brother. Finally she got it. The one that looked like Dan had his eyebrows way up, which was most uncharacteristic, and when the talkative one asked him to confirm a point all he could do was wave his arms.

"*Well!*" she said. "I never heard of anything so ridiculous in my whole life!" Then her eyes softened and she went to the one she now knew to be Jugby. "Are you all right, Wadworth, dear?" Dan noticed that she showed no concern for him—only for her pet. Why in hell didn't they get married? Well, for one thing Jugby was blinking like an owl and backing away—he was obviously pleased, but wary.

"We might as well change back," Dan said, and got out the little machine. "I'm afraid there isn't much to watch," he said, as he saw Claire's interest. "The exchange is not visible—merely one of identity, or essence." He and Jugby held the electrode handles, and he turned the switch.

"How did you feel, being in someone else's body, Wadworth?" Claire asked the one who was Dan again.

"It's me, Sis," he said. "It only takes an instant." She turned away from him impatiently, and repeated her question. Jugby very nearly pulled the machine off the table as he got up, but Dan caught it in time. "You know," she went on after a moment, to her brother, "I think I'd like to try it myself . . ." The motherly look was replaced by a speculative one.

"That's what I was going to suggest," Dan said, trying not to sound too eager. "In fact, now that I know it works, I'd like to get a group of people in a circle and see if we can't shift everybody one move to the right, as it were. A would become B; B would become C; C would become D, and so on."

"What happens to Z?" she asked.

"He becomes A, naturally. That's why it's a circle. Well, we've got us three—who else d'you think would try it?"

She pondered. "How about Jane and Ellis Mulholland? They joined that silly parachute club this year, so I imagine they'd take a chance on anything."

"Good idea," Dan said.

"Do you think," Jugby said, that your friend, Mr. Rivers . . . ?" He finished the sentence in deaf-and-dumb language.

"Byron Rivers? Hey, that's good thinking: he's got terrific scientific curiosity."

"How does that differ from the other?" Claire asked.

"It doesn't. Will you call up the Mulhollands or shall I?"

"You do it, Danny. You're so persuasive."

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He did so, without explaining the details, and they were enthusiastic, although they thought it was some kind of joke. Then he phoned Byron Rivers at his house in Teaneck, and Rivers asked Dan if he felt all right. It took considerable technical jargon to get through to him. Finally he got the message and agreed to come over the following evening, to "look in on the experiment." Dan was confident that he would not be able to resist taking part, once he saw the machine in actuality.

The next night all six of them sat in a circle, after dinner which Claire fixed in Dan's kitchen. She was a cordon bleu.

"I'd think you'd have to have six machines," she was saying. "You know—one between each of us . . . I should say, between every pair—or however you put it."

"Hell no," Dan said. "It's got a multiple hookup—two electrodes per person. Well, here we are: you take *these*, and you take *these*. . ." He went on around the circle, distributing them. "All set? O.K. Here we go." He turned the switch and exclamations of surprise and disbelief came from the newly changed.

There was considerable amusement for a while when they became accustomed to it, and after changing back, it became a sort of game to try out new combinations. After a while, Byron Rivers wanted to stop, and have the machine explained to him in more detail, but the Mulhollands begged for one more go.

"All right," Dan said. "That is, if you don't mind, Byron? Personally I found yesterday's tryout curiously exhausting, didn't you, Jugby?"

Jugby shook his head. He was in seventh heaven to look at him. "Oh, *no!*" he said.

They rearranged themselves, after a short discussion, in yet a new order; it went: Dan, Jane Mulholland, Jugby, Claire, Byron Rivers, Ellis Mulholland, and back to Dan again. "All set?" he asked and turned the switch. The result was not essentially different from what it had been before, and after a short while they reformed the circle again and were changed back. A certain number of highballs had been drunk during the course of the various exchanges—even Byron, who never touched it, found himself with two drinks of whiskey in him as the result of Ellis's temporary occupancy, and to his surprise found that he liked it. Consequently, it was not immediately noticed that the party was one short.

"Where on earth is Mr. Jugby?" Jane Mulholland asked.

"He must have gone out," Dan said. "Or else he's in the —"

"My God!" Jane interrupted him. "Look what's in this chair!"

Lying in a heap where she was pointing were a man's suit, the

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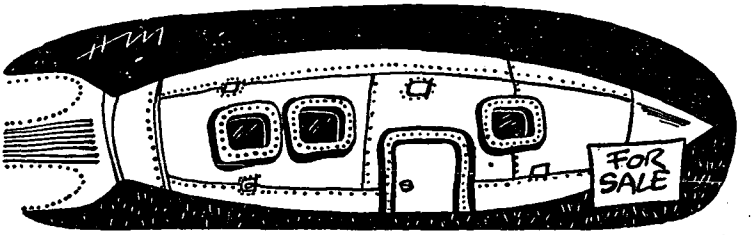
still-buttoned shirt in it, and socks and shoes on the floor. The suit was a conservative worsted—Jugby's—and he was not in the bathroom. They stood around looking stunned, all except Claire. She had a curiously contented expression.

When she saw that her brother was staring at her, she blinked and raised her eyebrows. Then she dropped her highball glass.

"Oh, I'm, er, sorry . . ." she said, and picked up the pieces, but she didn't look in the least sorry. When she straightened up, she glanced toward the windows. "Why, it's raining!" she said, waving her hands. Her eyes were starry. "I think we'll . . . I mean, I'll go for a walk . . ."



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THE DYING LIZARDS

by Isaac Asimov

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AGO, I wrote a story called "Day of the Hunters" in which, in fictional form, I presented a new theory to account for the sudden death of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period, 70 million years ago.

The theory was a simple one. Toward the end of the Cretaceous, I suggested, a certain group of small dinosaurs had developed intelligence, invented missile weapons and hunted all the other dinosaurs to extinction. Then, for lack of any other prey, they hunted themselves to death, too.

Why are there no records of intelligent dinosaurs, then, or say, dinosaurs, with large brain capacities? Well, intelligent creatures leave few fossils. Look how few primate fossils we discover, and primates are much more recent than the dinosaurs. As for artifacts—

But I am not here to defend my thesis, which, actually, I don't think is defensible. I used it merely to write a little story (which turned out to be what Damon Knight would call "minor Asimov") that would develop a not-too-subtle moral for our times.

The problem remains, though. What killed off the dinosaurs?

For 150 million years, after all, an astonishing series of bulky reptilian species had dominated Earth's life-forms. (I will call them "dinosaurs" in this article even though, as I explained last month, this is an inadequate term. There are two broad classes of "dinosaurs," properly called the saurischians and the ornithischians, and there are large and spectacular reptiles, including the pterosaurs, ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs which are not, strictly speaking, dinosaurs at all. Now that I've gotten that cleared away, let's forget it.)

To get back to the problem, then—

All through this 150 million year period, from 220 million years ago to 70 million years ago, individual species of dinosaurs became extinct, sometimes without leaving descendants, as far as we know, and some-

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times having previously branched off other species which, in a sense, replaced them. On other occasions, a species might grow extinct in the sense that it underwent slow changes that turned it into a new species, or into several new species.

About 70 million years ago, however, quite suddenly (say, within a million years perhaps) all the remaining dinosaurian species became extinct, leaving no descendants behind.

A hundred fifty years ago, this was easy to explain, because at that time the doctrine of "catastrophism" was popular among biologists. In an age when the Bible was still revered as literal truth, biologists had to square the gathering evidence in favor of an Earth, and of fossil creatures, both many millions of years old, with a Biblical tale that made creation of both Earth and life seem to have taken place merely 6,000 years ago.

A hint to the solution was found in the tale of the Flood. A Swiss naturalist, Charles Bonnet, suggested in 1770 that fossils were remnants of extinct species that had been destroyed in any of a series of world-wide cataclysms of which the Biblical Flood was only the most recent.

After each such cataclysm life would begin anew, and Biblical truth could be preserved by saying that it dealt only with the most recent of several different creations.

The most prominent exponent of such catastrophism was the French naturalist, Georges Cuvier, who, in the first decades of the 19th Century, was the foremost student of fossils. With great skill he compared the anatomy of the fossils and showed that they could be arranged in a logical manner and fitted into still existing phyla. Using hindsight, we can see that what he did fairly shouted "Evolution!" at the top of its voice.

But Cuvier was a pious Protestant who would not accept evolutionary explanations. Instead, he carefully pinpointed the location of four places in the fossil record where there seemed gaps. These, he held, were four examples of Bonnet's catastrophes.

Alas for Cuvier! More and more fossils were discovered and their order in time was more and more clearly worked out. —And all the gaps disappeared. There is no point in time from the moment the fossil record begins (at a point we now know to be 600,000,000 years ago) to the present, where all forms of life cease to exist. Life was created only once.

In fact, there are species still alive and flourishing today that have existed with little change since before the time of the dinosaurs. The horseshoe crab is an example: it has not changed very much in 300,000,000 years.

Yet there have been times in the history of life when a great many

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species have indeed "suddenly" ceased to exist, while a great many other species kept right on going, and this is hard to explain.

A "partial catastrophe" must have taken place 70 million years ago. Something happened that killed off many species in a wide variety of habitats—the pterosaurs in the air and the ichthyosaurs in the sea, as well as the clumping land dinosaurs, while leaving other species intact. The early ancestors of the birds and of the mammals lived right through the end of the Cretaceous. So did the ancestors of the reptiles that still live today—even the ancestral crocodiles which were not-too-distant relatives of the dinosaurs. And plant life lasted through the end-of-the-Cretaceous dividing line practically untouched.

What the answer might be nobody knows, but there have been a number of interesting speculations on the matter.

For instance, there might have been a climatic change. The dinosaurs may have been adapted to a mild Earth of flat land and shallow seas, with little seasonal variations. Then came a period of mountain building. The land heightened and grew rugged; the sea deepened and grew cold; the seasons became more extreme—and the dinosaurs died off.

I don't like this myself—at least, not as a sole explanation.

Surely the Earth didn't get climatically unsuitable everywhere. Creatures have managed to hang on to restricted habitats when things went bad. The giant redwoods cling to places in California; the tuatara clings to its islands off New Zealand. Surely, there must have remained mild and marshy areas where at least some of the smaller dinosaurs might have hung on, at least for a while.

And could climatic changes alone kill the ichthyosaurs in the relatively unchanging environment of the sea?

Or perhaps it was the living environment that did it. The little furry proto-mammals, scurrying through the underbrush and doing their best to evade the eyes of the lordly reptilian masters, might nevertheless have grown fat on dinosaurian eggs left to care for themselves by the dimwitted parents.

And eventually the mammals might have eaten enough eggs to block the generations and awoke one morning to find the reptiles gone. It is a dramatic story in a way, and it suits us right down to the ground since it presents us mammals as heroes (if skulking egg-eaters can be considered heroes).

There are difficulties, of course. Primitive mammals had been in

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existence for a hundred million years by the time the Cretaceous period drew near its end. We must suppose that they suddenly increased in numbers and began to take an unbearable toll of dinosaur eggs. Or else, we can decide that certain new species developed that specialized in these eggs, while leaving reasonably untouched the eggs of the ancestral crocodiles, lizards, snakes and turtles.

And, for that matter, how did these mammals get at the eggs of the ichthyosaurs, which brought forth their young alive—and in the sea, in any case.

Then, there are the falling-domino modifications that make capital of the fact that life is interdependent. Why should we suppose something had happened that affected every single one of the extinct species alike. Perhaps only a relatively small number of species were affected, and when these began to dwindle and die out, other species which depended upon the first set for food or for other necessities also died, and these in turn brought about the extinction of others—until a whole swatch of the fabric of life was cut out of existence.

This must happen all the time. It can easily be seen as a threat now. If the eucalyptus tree were to become extinct, the koala would have to become extinct, too, for it will eat nothing but eucalyptus leaves. If the zebra population were to vanish overnight, the African lions would drastically decrease in numbers. It doesn't even have to be a matter of food. Wipe out bees and numerous species of plants that depend on bees for cross-pollination will be wiped out also.

Something like that may have happened at the Cretaceous-end. A group of species that formed part of a particularly tight inter-weaving of life died out, and with them, the rest of the web went.

But what could the initiating factor have been?

Could a climatic change have killed some species and set the dominoes to falling? Did a group of egg-eating mammals kill off *some* species? Was it perhaps the advent of some new strain of bacteria or virus that killed off certain species in a vast plague?

Was it, on the other hand (as I have seen suggested) a plant evolution? Did the development of modern grasses, which are hard, tough, and ruinous even to the highly adapted molars of the modern horse, bring about the end? The herbivorous dinosaurs, used to softer, more succulent vegetation (and possessing teeth to suit), began, perhaps, to decline as the grass-like plants spread more and more at the expense of the earlier species. And with the herbivores dying, the carnivores who fed upon them had to starve as well.

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It remains only to chose the particular mechanism that set the dominoes to falling, and so far, no one has been able to. There are too many possibilities to choose from and no reasonable evidence upon which to base the choice.

Indeed, I haven't even discussed all the possibilities yet. So far, I've mentioned only causes that could be one-shots or, if periodic, totally unpredictable. After all, when will there be another really radical weather-change? When will a new plague come? When will there be the equivalent of creatures to eat our eggs or plants to set our cattles' teeth on edge?

It is much more interesting, in a grisly sort of way, to speculate on the possibility of reasonably predictable periodic occasions on which there would be a Great Dying. We do, in fact, find signs in the fossil record of periodic events of this kind, with the one at the end of the Cretaceous the most spectacular only because it is the most recent and therefore has its fossil record best preserved. (By speculating on such periodic Great Dyings, be it noted, we turn the scientific wheel full cycle and are back to something a little bit like Cuvier's catastrophism. —This often happens in science.)

Let's think, then, as to what might possibly give rise to a periodic effect which, at more or less fixed intervals, would place enormous strain upon life-forms and weed them out with a kind of blind ruthlessness.

It has sometimes been suggested that there is a natural life-expectancy to species; that species, like individuals, have a lusty youth, a vigorous prime, a fading old age and then a senile death. Perhaps the Great Dyings take place when the species-lifetimes of a large number of species just happen to reach the end together.

Actually, there's no evidence at all that species grow senile in the sense that individuals do, but can we put things in other terms? Instead of talking of senility and life-expectancy, let's talk of mutations.

All species are constantly subject to mutations, and mutated individuals arise in each generation. In the vast majority of cases, these mutations are for the worse, and the mutated forms survive less well than do the normal. If there are enough mutations, however, and if the mutated forms are enough of a burden on the species as a whole, the species can be weakened to the point where it succumbs to its enemies. In that sense, the species may be viewed as growing "senile."

Then, too, particular species may develop a tendency for certain types of disastrous mutations. This is more likely to happen when crea-

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tures have grown so specialized that they are oversensitive to changes in the environment or in their own physiology. A creature with too elaborate a set of armor or too unbalanced a structure may pass beyond the practical with even a small change.

We ourselves are not immune. We have an extraordinarily complicated mechanism—in many stages—of blood clotting. Our blood clots with remarkable efficiency, but the complications mean that it is subject to an unusually high failure-rate, since there are so many stages that can go wrong. A sizable number of mutations occur in each generation of mankind which involve some imperfection in the clotting mechanism. The resultant "bleeders" cannot live long without heroic measures.

Again, the human species has developed an enormous head to house our giant brains. The female pelvis has barely kept pace, and infants are born with outsize skulls that can barely squeeze through the pelvic opening and even then only at the price of distorting the still-soft cranium. In several ways, then, *Homo sapiens* is at the ragged edge of disaster and cannot afford a rise in mutation rate.

Suppose now there is an increase in the mutation rate. If a species or group of species is so well-balanced that there are relatively few likely mutations that can result in death, it can endure that increase moderately well. If, on the other hand, a species is near disaster in some way, a sudden increase in the mutation rate might just wipe it out.

If the causes bringing about an increase in mutation rate are temporary, then only certain vulnerable species will go, while the less vulnerable ones may survive, albeit somewhat ravaged and changed.

Perhaps all the dinosaurs shared something that made them particularly vulnerable to the ravages of certain mutations. Perhaps all went (either directly or as part of the chain-of-life) when mutation rates climbed at the end of the Cretaceous. Those that survived (including our own ancestors) happened to be less vulnerable, that's all.

And perhaps there are additional periods of increased mutation-rates to come, and perhaps in the game of evolutionary musical chairs, we won't always be among the winners.

But what is it that happens? What would raise the mutation rate?

One answer that springs to mind is radiation. The Earth is bombarded by hard radiation of varying origin. There is the radioactivity of the crust itself, for one thing. However, there is no reason why that radioactivity should suddenly increase at particular times. In fact, the only change it can undergo, as far as we know, is that of a slow but steady decrease.

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What about the radiation that bombards Earth from outer space: the Sun's radiation, and the cosmic rays from beyond the Solar system.

Much of this radiation is absorbed by the atmosphere before it reaches the Earth's surface, and much of it (at least the electrically charged components of it) is deflected by the Earth's magnetic field. As a result of this deflection, the Earth is surrounded by regions in which charged particles, in high density, dance back and forth along the magnetic lines of force (forming the Van Allen belts) and leak down into the upper atmosphere in the polar regions to form the aurorae.

Clearly, if Earth's magnetic field were to vanish, charged particles (including the cosmic ray particles) would no longer be deflected and more of them would strike the Earth's surface. The effect would be to raise the radiation level and, therefore, the mutation rate.

But could the Earth's magnetic field vanish?

Possibly! Consider the Sun, for instance. It has an 11-year Sunspot cycle, as we all know. That is, the number of Sunspots rises steadily, reaching a maximum, then falls to a minimum that is nearly zero, then rises to another maximum, and so on. The length of time from maximum to maximum averages 11 years, though the actual time-lapse between recorded maxima has varied from 7 to 17 years.

The Sunspots have magnetic fields associated with them, and the orientation of the magnetic field is opposite in the two hemispheres. If in the Northern Hemisphere, spots have the north magnetic pole on top (so to speak), those in the Southern Hemisphere have the south magnetic pole on top. Then, in the next cycle, the situation switches. The Northern Hemisphere spots have the south magnetic pole on top, and the Southern Hemisphere spots have the north magnetic pole there. To restore the Sunspot cycle magnetically as well as numerically one must wait 22 years.

It is not certain whether this means that the Sun's general magnetic field regularly reverses polarity so that every 22 years the Sun's north magnetic pole becomes its south magnetic pole and vice versa. If this happens, one must not suppose that the magnetic axis suddenly topples and turns over. What probably happens is that the entire magnetic field weakens and declines to zero and then begins to strengthen again in the opposite direction, wth Sunspot minima probably coming at times of zero field. Why this happens (assuming it does happen) no one knows.

Can the same thing happen to Earth's much smaller magnetic field? Well, there are indications in the rocks (as, for instance, in the orientation of magnetized minerals) that there have been periods in Earth's

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history when the south magnetic pole was where the north magnetic pole now is and vice versa. Presumably, this happens because the Earth's magnetic field gradually fades to zero, then strengthens in the opposite direction.

As a matter of fact, it seems that the Earth's magnetic field has indeed been weakening during the centuries it has been under observation. It has lost 15 percent of its strength since 1670 and at the present rate of decrease it will reach zero by 4000 A.D. Between 3500 and 4500, the magnetic field will not be strong enough to ward off any charged radiation to speak of.

We ourselves won't live to see it, of course, but a matter of two thousand years isn't long even in terms of human civilization, let alone in terms of geologic eras, and it is not something we can dismiss with a shrug.

And it is a shame, for it seems rather bad luck for us to be so close to a reversal. The last reversal, as nearly as we can tell from the rocks, may have taken place as much as 700,000 years ago.

What will happen when the magnetic field fades? Perhaps, by 3500, we will have the technological capacity to shield the Earth artificially, but suppose we don't. Will the mutation rate go up in the thousand years of non-shielding and kill the less stable or "senile" species? Will we be among the senile? Is Judgment Day coming?

Perhaps not. After all, 700,000 years ago, when the magnetic field may have reversed itself, there was no Great Dying. Or if there was a Little Dying, man's hominid ancestors were not included. They may even have improved if the mutation rate had gone up. At least man's brain grew in volume with explosive speed (in terms of ordinary evolutionary rates of change) and one might speculate that it was the result of an unusual number of lucky mutations.

Besides, I have seen calculations which showed that even if there were no magnetic field at all and no interception of charged particles, the level of radiation at the surface of the Earth would not rise sufficiently to increase the mutation rate dangerously.

Suppose we tackle it from the other end. Forget Earth's magnetic field for a while, and ask whether the radiation bombardment might increase drastically at the source. The Sun sends out x-rays from its corona as a matter of course and occasionally accompanies a giant flare with a burst of soft cosmic rays. The quantity of this radiation is too small to harm life, but what if it suddenly increased in intensity considerably.

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It's not likely. The Sun could scarcely undergo the changes necessary for becoming much more active as an x-ray and cosmic ray emitter without becoming much more active in the emission of ultraviolet and visible light as well, and the Sun doesn't do such things.

From everything we know (or think we know) about the Sun and about stars generally, and from everything we can deduce from the fossil record, an erratic Sun is not in the cards. Our good old Solar heating plant is utterly reliable and hasn't changed noticeably from eon to eon.

What about cosmic rays from sources other than the Sun? These are the only significant non-solar samples of hard radiation that we get.

Lately, K. D. Terry of the University of Kansas, and W. H. Tucker of Rice University have speculated on the possible effects of stars going supernova in the neighborhood of our Solar system.

They point out that a good massive type II supernova (involving the virtually total explosion of a star ten times the mass of our Sun) would give off up to 2×10^{51} ergs of energy in the form of cosmic rays alone, emitting it all over the period of a few days at most.

Let us say that this cosmic ray energy is delivered in the space of a week. It would then be equivalent to roughly *one trillion times the total energy delivered by the Sun in that week.*

How much of that energy would reach us? If such a supernova were 16 light-years away, the cosmic ray energies reaching us from that vast distance would still be equal to the Sun's total radiation for that week. Undoubtedly, that would fry us all properly.

However, there are very few stars of any kind that, right now, are as close to us as 16 light-years, and of those that are, none are large enough to give rise to the biggest kind of supernova. The only close star that could go supernova at all would be Sirius, and that would make a rather mild one.

However, we don't have to insist on a total frying. Consider supernova explosions that take place at great distances and bathe us with smaller concentrations of cosmic rays. Those smaller concentrations might still be enough to cause trouble, and there is room for many more supernovas far away than close by. The volume of space goes up as the cube of the distance, and the number of supernovas within 200 light-years is two thousand times as many as the number within 16 light-years.

Terry and Tucker point out that the present dose of cosmic rays reaching the top of the atmosphere is equal to 0.03 roentgen per year, which is very little, really. And yet, judging from the frequency of

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supernova, their random positions and sizes, they calculate that Earth could receive a concentrated dose of 200 roentgens, thanks to supernova explosions, every ten million years or so, on the average, and considerably larger doses at correspondingly longer intervals. In the 600 million years since the fossil record began, there is a reasonable chance that at least one 25,000 roentgen flash (!) reached us.

Perhaps then the periodic Great Dyings in the history of life reveal the explosions of large stars within a few hundred light-years of our Solar system.

And perhaps the effect is worst when such a sizable explosion just happens to come when the Earth's magnetic field is in its period of reversal and the unshielded surface gets the full benefit of the cosmic ray frying pan. After all, our magnetic field is weak now, much weaker than at its maximum. There are probably times when even moderately strong doses of cosmic rays might not make it, but now they will; and by 3500 they will do so even more readily. A supernova that in 300,000 B.C. would not have affected Earth, might lay us pretty low now.

Well, then, if we can find a record in the rocks that about 70,000,000 years ago there was a magnetic field reversal, and if we can find a record in the skies that 70,000,000 years ago there was a spectacular supernova in our neighborhood, and if there were some way of showing they were simultaneous, then I would be strongly tempted to look no further for the cause of the death of the dinosaurs.

And what about our not-too-distant descendants? Must we hold our breaths and cross our fingers for them? What if during the thousand year interval of virtually no shielding whatever, Sirius goes supernova, or a larger, but more distant, star does it.

The chances are extremely small. As far as we know, no star within

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several hundred light-years is sufficiently late in its evolutionary development to make a supernova explosion likely—but, then, we don't know all there is to know about what makes a supernova explode, and when.

It just barely could be. The cosmic ray incidence may go up enough to make a Dying, Great or Little, and there is nothing to insure the immunity of Homo sapiens if that comes to pass.

And if we die and the crocodiles and lizards survive, there may be a kind of reptilian last laugh at our expense.

ADDENDUM

In my article COUNTING CHROMOSOMES (F & SF, June 1968) I guessed that the Polish woman athlete with the anomalous chromosome count was an XYY. I have received a letter from a cytogeneticist which informs me that she was probably an XXX. The XXX individuals were at first considered "super-females" from work done on fruit-flies. In humans, this is apparently not so, and my correspondent seems to think the athlete should not have been disqualified.

He also says that the XYY and XXYY individuals are males "who tend to rage reactions with fatal consequences to people and property in their presence."

—You know, I wonder if a program should begin for the chromosome analysis of all individuals. How common are these anomalies? How many XYY's are there, for instance, walking around, with people trying to calm them down by making soft, clucking noises?

—ISAAC ASIMOV

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This new David Bunch story shares qualities of sardonic humor and very high density (as in a good poem) with his earlier THAT HIGH-UP BLUE DAY *. . . (March 1968). Otherwise, it is quite different. It concerns the struggle between Man and Time, a struggle that you may have thought of as one-sided until now. A book collection of Mr. Bunch's short stories is due out soon.*

A SCARE IN TIME

by David R. Bunch

IT WAS UP IN THE BIG LOFT OF the world where time came home for orders—the seconds, the minutes, the hours, the days, the riding years and the witch-nosed centuries. They hung up the bright eyes they had seen; they hung up the beautiful faces; they hung up all the cats and dogs, too . . . They talked in low tones of the victories, and always these victories told of battles lost by the Strugglers-Against-Hopeless-Odds. "What keeps them at it?" was asked and asked again. And answer there was not, of course—no adequate reply. There were tries, of course, honest tries, and some coarse attempts at jest. But up in the big loft where all time checked home for orders there was wonderment, mostly, constant wonderment, and merriment, and sometimes a small doubt crept in to subjugate that merriment.

"I think they do it because they have no other choice," a braggart minute said, and laughed a braggart's laugh. "We are so much their masters that the choice is not with them."

"Oh yes, the choice is with them," piped up a small wan second, changing to lounging clothes. "But the choice is hard. So hard that they just go on. Take it to yourself. What would you do? How would you feel, say, if you found yourself somehow in a place with the walls all up and the winds of doubt all blowing? And you didn't know how you had got there? And you didn't know if you had been sent on urgent worthwhile business or somehow had just accidentally wandered in for nothing?—I think they stay, some of them at least, hoping for a sign. They figure that every breath they draw gives them a chance to

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KNOW. Before they have to go away, something may break of significance, so they keep on breathing. And watching. And listening. And sometimes, I have heard, they pray."

"HA and HO," guffawed a long-faced hour. "You give them credit much too much. Most of them stay to play games, gawk (with scarcely any comprehension at all) at the universal wonders and clown around. They never give one solid thought to anything but their own merriment games—until a certain time! Then when vigor begins to wane, when pleasure-chasing closes for them, and any continued enjoyment becomes less feasible, more and more, they fall back to their little invented out. They've left their exit open. Oh, yes! And do they run for it! They pray for some after-dinner time then. Oh, after the feast, they'll go high up and live again, even better. YES!—How contemptible. I really march on that kind!"

"I think this is all unnecessary talk," said a long-eared year. He took his boots off, rubbed his feet and said, "What a trip! I chased them harder this time than ever before. But I think it won't be long now until we'll not have those little calendars down there measuring up our span. What a belittlement it is that in this one place in all the universe there should rise up this one grubby tribe that presumes to measure us. But I think it must be soon now they go. Why, they've filled that place down there with enough gadgetry to run a galaxy—and that's going to do them in—but good! Then we'll just get the gadgetry, with rust and a lot of wear and tear, to close up that shop—but entirely!" His eyes went to wide and vacant stare, and no doubt he meant to hint to everyone that heard that the prediction he predicted was dramatic.

Just then there came a knock at the outer door of the onion-shaped Dome of Time. "Oh God!" a tall stooped century said, "we have not been checked upon in many many a millennium! Is everything in order? What have we done? Do you suppose He's come again to change it all around? I would not have it changed, for then I might not know myself. The possibilities for rearrangement are limitless, you know, truly limitless and entirely appalling. At least, appalling to me. I hope, oh, I hope it isn't something new."

A section of the Dome of Time fell down in chaos then, and a figure loomed there, not in arrogance but in fine pride—shining, straight and glowing with good poise. "Come see my horse!" it said in a certain voice of childlike honest bragging, and there was not really bad boast in it, but mostly just wholesome satisfaction with a job significantly well brought off. "I paused by here to show you this shining steed we've done, to let

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you know we're on our way at last. I thought you might be interested in my space horse."

But all the minions of time were quiet and dour. No congratulatory message came, no word of praise. They could see the hand writing on all the curves of space. This upstart Earthling weakling, that they had counted out down there so many times, apparently had come up with a wondrous argument in metal and raw speed that might just turn all accepted and known dimensions upside down. "We've been a long time at this," the shining visitor said into the silent Dome of Time just then. "But now we've got it! This horse that can do the job. This space nag is all engine and go and space-eat and distance-grab. He's leaned down to race faster than a thought can think. When I but flick a knob, he'll lob off out there instantly to the farthest rind of all the universe. He'll eat up light years to make a joke of distance. Believe me, when I but give the word for a few changes, he'll tear out there in such a way as to make time almost or quite—NOTHING. —Oops! beg pardon! Not meaning to offend, but the lid is blowing off for you impostors—both Space and Time fake-diddlers. When I ask that horse to do all he can do, you fakers may be left. You may be OUT. You may not be at all. —But I didn't come by to threaten you. In fact, I thought you might be proud of me and want to feel my horse and pat him on the prow. —But, beg pardon again, and I see I have miscued about your feelings entirely. So I'll be off now to see what total speed can do in space to tie a knot in time. Cheerios, and if it be that we shall not ever meet again here in this onion dome of yours to know the old dimensions —well, change is the game's name. RIGHT?"

Then with a little lift of the hand in a somehow greeting of farewell and also a gesture of hail hello, he was gone out from the onion dome and in through a most ingenious door in his shining craft. The door closed after him and machine and rider were one then, one marvelous one, as most remarkable engines meshed to total power and total power transformed to total speed . . .

"If he in that contrivance outraces all of Space, what of Time?" they asked in the onion globe.

"GOD KNOWS!" they answered themselves in the onion globe, shaking their heads, shaking everywhere. And all Space-Time waited now, helpless and excited, expecting that this upstart Earthling, who had somehow held to a main course through all his heartbreaks and many changes, might just move a deadlock that had existed since Ever and All began. ◄

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Henry Slesar makes a welcome and bright return to these pages with a story about the essential fatalist attitude, Hollywood style. "Everything is Written down beforehand, our whole lives," said Legget, who produced movies. And, like all producers, he wanted a look at the script.

THE MOVING FINGER TYPES

by Henry Slesar

LEGGET KNEW THAT MITCH Cohen had been ducking him, but in his vegetative condition of the last few weeks, Legget hadn't cared. Now things were different, and he cared enough to have figuratively backed Mitch up against the non-figurative wall of Thomajon's, a small bistro on Sunset Strip. They had been friends since meeting at a studio party and discovering that they were fellow Chicagoans, transplanted like the palm trees. Both had been dutifully nostalgic about the Loop, critical of L.A., and cynical about the movie business. Now, three years later, Mitch was working steadily behind a camera, pulling in large, satisfying paychecks, and Legget, a man with producing aspirations, had drifted, bobbed, sunk, floated, and somehow survived the Hollywood waters.

There was no doubt in Legget's mind about why Mitch had been reluctant to see him, not after their last psyched-up luncheon at Tail O' the Cock. "Look, let's not even talk about that," Mitch said generously, waving his blunt fingers in a Wipe across the past. "You were pretty low, Norman; this town had you talking to yourself. Uh, by the way, you working?"

"Yes," Legget said, staring into his drink. "Got a job this morning. Assistant to Marty Lang at Universal."

"Great! You're moving again."

"Yes," Legget said. "That's the word, Mitch, I'm *moving.* I'm not stuck on dead center anymore; that's what I wanted to tell you." He let Mitch see his eyes, even

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though he knew his friend might be jolted by their intensity. "I found my place, Mitch," he said. "Just like I told you. I lost my place and then I found it again . . ."

"Norman, Norman," Mitch groaned. "Not that again, not that *idea* of yours . . ."

"But it's not just an idea. It's a *fact*. I know I sounded like a nut case the last time, I didn't have any proof. But now I've got it, Mitch. I can prove it to you, to anybody. If you'll just *listen*.

"I told you about that office in Chicago. I was working in this old building on Michigan, writing a lot of junk for a trade publisher, about dry cleaning and poultry farming and God knows what else. You know those office buildings, a million frosted glass doors with all kinds of weirdo names painted on them, people who make gold fillings and corrugated boxes and who knows what, and one day, I noticed a door with the words: DESTINY PRODUCTIONS. It could have been fourteen million things, of course, but I got curious enough to go in and ask. There was a girl out in front with a face like a blank sheet of paper, and she gave me a lot of vague answers, and all I could see from the anteroom was a million filing cabinets and all I could hear was a lot of clattering typewriters. She offered to have me talk to one of the executives, but by this time I didn't want to bother, so I walked out.

"Well, that would have been the end of it, except for that day I was looking for Willie Hyam's Theatre West building; he had an acting class going, and he wanted me to talk to his kids. It was someplace way out on Ventura, and I got lost and saw this white stucco building tucked behind the telephone poles, so small maybe nobody else would have noticed it. But I did, because there was a little white sign outside that said: DESTINY PRODUCTIONS, and I got curious all over again. Whatever those guys in Chicago were doing with their file cabinets and typewriters, they had a West Coast branch.

"So I tried the same routine. I went into the office, and I got an ice-water reception from the girl out front who wanted to know my business, but *exactly*. I faked being a freelance reporter, curious about the name of the company, and that got me nowhere, especially since I wasn't carrying any press identification. This time, though, I stuck it out long enough to have some guy come out of the main section to talk to me. His name was Ankim, and he was a tall, thin man in an undertaker's Sunday suit, and all I can remember about his looks was a head of waxy white hair, probably a falsie. In fact, that was a funny thing I thought about later, the *nothingness* of Ankim's face, and the nothingness of that *girl's* face, too. Anyway, he was polite enough, in

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a non-oily, non-informative way, and when I asked him if his company had something to do with movie production, hinting around that maybe I was a biggie who could *do* things for him, he smiled and said, in a way, in a *limited* kind of way. And the next thing I remember—pay attention to this part, it's crazy—the very next thing I remember is being back behind the wheel of my Volks. I wasn't drinking, I didn't have any blackout, I was just *there,* driving along the Hollywood Freeway, heading back for Westwood. I never saw Willie Hyam's theatre or anything, and all I could remember about Destiny Productions was a feeling, a visceral kind of thing, a cold, twitchy sensation right down to the bone. I felt as if I had touched something outside of any kind of *realness*—I don't mean ghostly or freakish—the closest thing to it was my one and only, thank God, trip, you remember that, when I felt as if my eyes were in my fingertips? . . . No, you're wrong, Mitch, I can see what you're thinking. I wasn't drunk, I wasn't coked, I wasn't anything but shook up.

"Anyway, I didn't think about Destiny Productions again, not until a good year-and-a-half later, when that damned fog settled over me.

"I don't know how to describe what happened to me. It was a kind of lethargy, an inertia, but it was more than that. It happened about the time I got my divorce from Phyllis; at first, I thought that had something to do with it, the change of my marital status, but it couldn't have been the answer. Divorcing Phyllis was like chopping off a limb that had been dead for years; I didn't even feel the cut of the axe. I was moving around like an automaton, eating, drinking and sleeping only because my instincts were still operating, pushing me between the dining table and bathroom and bedroom. I didn't want to see anyone, talk to anyone, go anywhere, do anything I didn't absolutely have to do. I finally got up enough energy to mention my plight to Fiedler—that's my shrink—and he called it an *Oblomov* syndrome. It's some freaky Russian novel, where the hero gives up on life, just wants to stay in bed all the time. Only I didn't want to do that, either; I was indifferent, but I was restless.

"Of course, this attitude didn't do me much good on the job. I was working for Dmitri at Warners at the time, and you know what happened; he canned me. I didn't give a damn; I didn't even try to make another connection. I spent all my mornings lying around the house, and all my afternoons at the movies. That was one thing I didn't lose; maybe it was part of my problem. Ever since I was a kid, I used to take myself to the movies, just

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cop out in the balcony, jaws agape, and let other people live my life for me. It suited my mood perfectly, so that's what I did. I saw every movie in town, some of them twice. And that's when I remembered about Destiny Productions.

"Mitch, stop looking around, I'm not going to get violent. I know my theory sounded nuts to you the last time, but you didn't know the whole story then. I mean, it's not just *my* theory, about predestination and stuff, whole civilizations and cultures have believed in it, for centuries. Millions of people believe in it right now. *It is Written.* You've heard that, Mitch. Everything is written down, beforehand, our whole lives, all put down on some kind of—celestial paper. Karma. Fate. Kismet. Destiny. *Destiny,* Mitch, you see?

"That's when I got the idea that maybe this outfit, this Destiny Productions, maybe they were the ones that did the Writing. After all, if it's *Written,* really *Written,* then somebody's got to put it all down, maybe literally, I mean. You take a movie; maybe it's only a simulation of reality, of life, but it has to be *written* first, somebody's got to put words into those mouths, somebody's got to tell the actors what to *do.* And it seemed to me that if *my* life was written down, maybe all that had happened to me was—*I'd lost my place.* That's all it could have been, Mitch, maybe it's what happens to millions of people, they just lost their place in the manuscript of their lives . . .

"Well, I had to go and find out. So I went looking for Destiny Productions, and it was only after days of trying that I located that white stucco building, only now I saw it really wasn't that small; its architecture was deceptive. This time, I was more deceptive, too; I even took an old press identification card with me, and I wouldn't budge out of that anteroom until the receptionist with the nothing face got Mr. Ankim out to see me.

"I told Ankim straight out what I thought, about the kind of work they did at Destiny Productions, and he looked at me with a forced sort of smile, pretending that I was some kind of religious nut that had wandered in off the Freeway, only I wouldn't let him play that game. I kept up my 'reporter' pose and dropped a lot of hints about exposing his company to a large, nosy Southern California public, and he looked even whiter and waxier when he heard that, and asked me into his private office.

"And then they told me the truth, Mitch. That this was it. This was the place where *It Was Written.* The whole thing. Your life. Mine. Everybody's.

"Now you're looking at me funny again. Okay, I can't blame you. But just hear the rest and see how it adds up. Because I was shown the evidence, Mitch, the proof that this was where all the *Writing* was

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done. No, not *all* of it, this was just the L.A. branch office; they had thousands all over the world, Ankim told me, looking sort of harried. With the way the population was exploding, they'd had to establish more and more offices all the time, and that meant finding all kinds of new ways of disguising their activities. And of course, they kept up with the times. Ankim said they used to write down a man's life like an old-fashioned Victorian novel, only now they used faster, modern techniques, the scenario format . . . Don't grin at me like that, Mitch; I actually *saw* one of these scripts, I actually saw my *own* . . .

"Yeah, that's right. I told Ankim what had happened to me, how I was *stuck* in some kind of groove. I told him I'd lost the place in my life scenario, and I wanted to find it again, find out what I was supposed to do next. Well, he didn't like that idea at all; he said I was mistaken, that people often felt undecided about what to do, but nobody actually lost their *place*. He even recommended psychoanalysis, can you feature that? But I told him no dice, that I wanted to *know*. I wanted advice, guidance, *direction*. And he said no, absolutely not, nobody could *ever* see the scenario of their own lives, it was strictly against Regulations. And I said to him, look, I don't want to see the whole thing, I don't *want* to know everything that's coming, it would give me the shakes to know that. All I wanted to learn was my next move, my next *scene*. And if he didn't help me—well, I won't kid you, Mitch, I threatened the guy; I said I'd tell the whole damned world about what went on there, and in all those Destiny Productions offices on earth—and *then* he'd be sorry he didn't bend the rules just a little bit . . .

"So that's when he gave in. He pushed a button on his desk, and told his nothing-faced secretary what to do, and she let out a little gasp. But she went out obediently, and a little while later, she came back with a script. Yes, a *script*, Mitch, thicker than the Los Angeles Telephone Directory, thank God—it looked like a nice, long, fat story for me—and then Ankim himself found my *place* in the scenario. It wasn't even halfway through the script, and he wouldn't let me see more than a couple of pages, and guess what it said? It was SCENE 13490, and it took place *at the offices of Destiny Productions*. Do you see, Mitch? Even my visit there. It was all *Written*. Typed, anyway.

"Then he let me see the next page of the script, and it was SCENE 13491. And the heading was:

INTERIOR — MARTY LANG'S OFFICE—DAY.

"It was the whole scene, Mitch, I swear to you. It was me and

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Lang, talking about the picture he had just signed to do at Universal. And after we shot the breeze a while, Lang made me an offer, and I took it. That was where the scene ended, and that was where Ankim took the book out of my hands.

"Well, I didn't make any protest; Ankim was looking pretty distressed by now, and I decided I'd gotten enough out of him anyway. He walked me out of this office, relieved that it was all over, I guess, because he even put his arm on my shoulder real friendly-like. He showed me a little bit of the operation, the long rows of filing cabinets, maybe a hundred blank-faced girls hammering away at IBMs. He didn't see me all the way out; he said he had to return my scenario to the proper place, and I said goodbye to him at the door of an office at the end of the hallway; it said something on the door, but I didn't take much notice of it. I was too excited, thinking about tomorrow, wondering if it was really going to happen the way it was put down . . .

"The next morning—no, *this* morning, Mitch—I went out to Universal and made a cold call on Marty Lang. No appointment, nothing, I just told the guard at the gate I wanted to see him, and Lang okayed it. Nine times out of ten, I would have gotten turned away, but this time Lang saw me. And you know what happened, Mitch? We played the scene. The same scene. *The way it was Written.* I knew every one of my lines, and he seemed to know his—like he'd been memorizing them all night. And like the script said, I got the job."

Mitch Cohen didn't talk for a while. Then he smiled weakly, and said, "Hey, aren't you supposed to be keeping all this a secret? I mean, isn't that what you promised what's-his-name, in return for looking at your—script?"

"Yes," Legget said, pushing his glass around in a circle. "That was what I promised. But it's hard to keep quiet about a thing like this. I think even Ankim realized that, and that's why I'm worried, Mitch, that's why I'm scared stiff . . ."

Mitch was looking at his watch. "Gee, I didn't realize it was so late, Norman. There's something I've got to do tonight—"

Legget put a hand over his friend's extended wrist. "You see, I remember now, Mitch, what it said on that office door. The office where Ankim took my scenario, when I was leaving—"

"I'm not snowing you, Norman, no kidding, I really have to go. There's this screening tonight—"

"Mitch, please *listen.* What it said on that door was—*Rewrite Room.*"

"What?"

"It said Rewrite Room," Legget said. But there was no reaction from his friend. He looked into

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Mitch Cohen's no-longer involved eyes, and saw that he had lost his audience. Instead of trying to recapture it, Legget gave Mitch a sagging smile, and clapped his drinking arm.

"Sure, pal," he said. "You go to your screening. I didn't mean to keep you so long."

"We'll get together soon," Mitch said. "Maybe you and Phyllis—I mean, maybe you can come up to the Canyon for a weekend sometime."

"Sure," Legget said. "I'd like that."

He ordered another drink after Mitch left. The bar was getting more crowded. A young couple, the girl smartly dressed and coolly indifferent to what was obviously a sales pitch, sat two stools away from Legget. He listened to the familiar rhythm of their argument, and then watched with interest when the young man tightened his jaw and walked away angrily. The girl didn't seem to mind losing him. She gave Legget a sideways glance. He thought how satisfying it would be, to slide over the vacant stools between them, say hello, and start talking to her, telling her, with properly amused expressions, the story that Mitch Cohen didn't believe. She wouldn't believe it either, of course, but Legget wanted to tell it again, about Destiny, and Ankim, and the script, and that chilling Rewrite Room. He had just decided to make his move when he realized that the girl, the bar, and the room were beginning to Fade Out.

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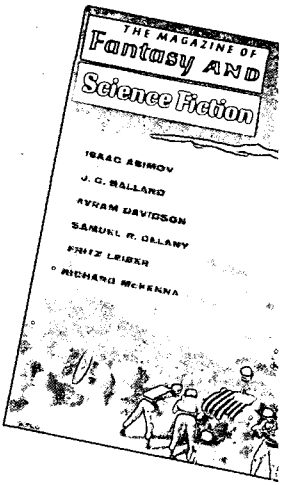

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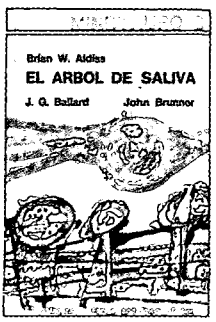

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